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SCREEN

INCORPORATING SCREEN EDUCATION

'I wanted to open up
the possibilities of
what women can do.'

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INTRODUCTION



Ticket of No Return, directed by Ulrike Ottinger, 1979.

This issue of *Screen* was planned between the 1986 and 1987 Créteil women's film festivals and addresses a number of problems that symptomatically emerge from that event, both as institution/intervention and within its own programme.

The crucial dichotomy characterising women's audio-visual culture in the West in the 1980s seems no longer to be, as it was in the '70s, that of same/other, but has shifted to an opposition between marginal and mainstream. As a small percentage of women in continental Europe and the USA are achieving some degree of integration into their respective industries, the issue of gender recedes behind those of industry recognition and box-office survival, and many of the women concerned reveal attitudes to feminism which range from indifference to hostility. This is notably the

case in France where such feelings are routinely expressed by French directors at Créteil.

This raises some uncomfortable questions – is this general movement part of a decline of feminism in the '80s? Is gender-identification for women only a stepping stone to higher achievements in the 'real' world; and was the feminist avant-garde of the '70s any more than a testing ground for the mainstream? Were the collective practices that characterised early feminist film-making merely a necessary stage towards individual authorship? Not that these questions affect only production and direction. As Caroline Merz puts it in her article on the British feminist distributor Circles, the choice in this sector seems to be increasingly 'between the possibility of immediate, short-term success and longer-term goals of building up solid

structures through an allegiance to feminist distribution'. Are women 'as women' forever confined to the heroic struggles of the pioneer taking on the patriarchal film industry (an example of which is developed in Carmen Huaco-Nuzum's article on the Mexican director Matilde Landeta), or to alternative forms of production (independent, avant-garde, shorts and video, with which most articles in this issue deal)? In other words, are women doomed to lose their gender specificity when they reach positions of power? While this might be considered desirable by some feminists, it strikes us that these changes are to be identified with the regrettable general retrenchment of the cultural Left in the West.

Whatever the urgency of such questions, they have no answer outside specific cultural, historical and industrial contexts. To understand these historical shifts, it is essential to pay attention to the environment of women's practices, to the tensions and oppositions which co-exist within particular nation states or particular modes of production and consumption (such as the European art film).

In inviting submissions and selecting articles for this issue, we followed a 'scattergun' approach, in the hope that from a diversity of positions and contexts some indication of the bearing of contextual, infrastructural and cultural factors on the formation of specific feminist perspectives would emerge. In this way, we intended to critique rather than duplicate the celebratory, unificatory nature of events such as the Créteil festival, and so to re-engage with an earlier moment of feminist audio-visual culture and theory which focused on the material determinants of female subjectivity and audio-visual practice. For such a project, we would have welcomed more contributions from those whose perspective is also determined by

ethnic difference, as it is precisely in the area of black cultural politics and theory that issues of context and experience have been usefully addressed in a tradition of social collectivity rather than individual psychology.

We have tried to deal with the question of feminist authorship in a diagnostic rather than validating way, always assuming that authorial intention is only one element in the construction of meaning. The interviews included here (with Sheila McLaughlin and Yvonne Rainer) should, therefore, be seen as referencing the realm of context rather than foreclosing on the process of meaning-production initiated by the text. Similarly, articles focusing on individual women (Yvonne Rainer, Ulrike Ottinger, Matilde Landeta) are intended to highlight both their formation and that of the immediate or ideal audiences for their work. The articles on the German journal *Frauen und Film*, recent developments in US women's video-making and the Créteil festival directly address questions of feminist culture as part of the public sphere. Finally, Laleen Jayamanne's photo-essay 'Passive Competence' is included as an example of an avant-garde practice which, through an engagement with questions of cultural difference manifested as linguistic difference, re-reflects the theoretical work of the '70s on language in a positive and invigorating way.

In addressing this range of practices and situations, we aim to indicate the importance of cultural specificity and cultural difference and to highlight the tension between the two often conflicting traditional demands of feminism – for a bigger slice of the pie, and for a change in the recipe.

ALISON BUTLER and
GINETTE VINCEDEAU

WOMEN'S CINEMA, FILM THEORY AND FEMINISM IN FRANCE

REFLECTIONS AFTER THE 1987 CRETEIL FESTIVAL BY GINETTE VINCEDEAU

¹ Ginette Vincendeau, 'Women as Auteur-e-s: Notes from Créteil', *Screen*, May-August 1986, vol 27 no 3-4, pp 156-162.

² Quoted by Anne Laurent, in 'Où sont passées les revues féministes', *La Revue des revues* no 3, Spring 1987, my translation.

³ The 'decline' of feminism, while particularly acute there, is clearly not specific to France – Meaghan Morris speaks, for Australia, of 'a sense of "feminism"', in both the media and in youth sub-cultures, as a superseded 70s style', in *Camera Obscura* no 12, p 54.

THERE IS SOMETHING both depressing and challenging about your object of study denying its own existence. When Chantal Akerman announced at Créteil's ninth Women's Film Festival this year that the notion of women's cinema was 'outdated', she was throwing into question not only the interest and work of many women present there, but also the validity of the event of which she was one of the stars. Akerman's position, however, is neither new nor unique to her. I mentioned briefly in my report on last year's Créteil festival¹ that feminism as a debate has vanished from the French cultural scene since the early '80s. Françoise Pasquier, the head of a publishing firm with a (small) feminist imprint, explains the situation:

*'Cultural' feminism is not dead: it simply no longer speaks, it has no name, because it has entered people's heads, including women's. I see no possibility of turning back. The fact that feminist journals disappear one by one is therefore natural: they have reached their objectives.*²

Pasquier's analysis of the situation is typical of the French consensus view that feminism – as a movement – has achieved its social aims and is thus no longer relevant. Debatable as this analysis is, one outcome is that any expression of feminism is perceived as a relic from the past – the '70s!³ – something retrograde, outmoded, *ringard*, as the current slang goes. Feminism as dinosaur. It is in this light that many people, including women, view the Créteil Festival, and the reason why a number of French women directors steer well clear of it (in this respect, Akerman's first ever appearance this year was some sort of a coup, even if it proved a double-edged one) and dissociate themselves from feminism altogether. Another outcome is that vulgar sexism in the media goes unchecked for

fear of ridicule, except in those marginalised contexts considered, precisely, ridiculous.⁴

Parallel to this popular caricature of feminism, a number of current theoretical developments problematise gender positionings in ways which, paradoxically, contribute to the avoidance of sexual difference as a meaningful issue. The works of leading French writers in 'post-modern' theory – Derrida, Lyotard, Baudrillard – propose a valorisation and incorporation of 'the feminine' in (mostly masculine) signifying practices – the male creator as 'woman', femininity as masquerade, the power of seduction. French culture in the '80s is generally fascinated by sexual ambiguity (androgyny, transvestism, transsexuality, and the like). Indeed, one of the stars of the Créteil discussions this year was Ovida Delect, a male transsexual who is the subject of a documentary by Françoise Romand called *Appelez-moi Madame*. Though such plays with sexual identity are valuable in undermining a biologically-tied notion of gender, their gains for women remain dubious.⁵ However, it is not my intention to enter this debate here, but rather to see how such an intellectual context relates to contemporary film-making by women in France, and to French film culture in general, including events such as Créteil.

The first point to be made is that the connection between theoretical debates about gender and feminism and women's film-making in France is at best oblique and at worst conflictual, as there is virtually no indigenous feminist film theory or theorising of gender and sexual difference in relation to the cinema, and precious little awareness of these issues in French film criticism. In an interview after this year's festival, Jackie Buet – one of the two principal organisers – recognised that this was a problem:

*We need reviews of the films during and after the festival, but there is no feminist film criticism in France; a dialogue with feminist critics might also influence our choice of films for the festival. As it is, the selection is left to us, we have to choose according to our own conscience.*⁶

Given the way contemporary theory, including film theory, is largely identified as 'French', this is a point that may surprise some outside France. By a now well-established route, the works of Barthes, Lacan, Derrida, Foucault, Kristeva, Irigaray, and more recently Baudrillard and Lyotard, travel from Paris to New York, Los Angeles, Sydney, London and beyond, where they are reworked and debated by feminist film theorists. They don't, however, return to Paris with any feminist 'aura'. To be sure, there are indications of growing resistance among English-speaking feminists to the use of theories by, say, Lacan and Derrida. In a recent article on cinematic pleasure and sexual difference, Joan Copjec gives expression to these hesitations as:

*a profound doubt, a fear of being deceived by the very theory through which we hope to be brought to truth.*⁷

⁴ Anne Laurent, op cit, singles out *Paris Féministe* (the stencilled bulletin from the Maison des Femmes, which in its March 1987 issue calls for an exploration of sexism in the media) as one of several 'fossilised mummies'.

⁵ See Barbara Creed 'From Here to Modernity: Feminism and Postmodernism', with her discussion of Alice Jardine's work in *Screen* Spring 1987, vol 28 no 2, pp 47-67.

⁶ Unpublished interview with Jackie Buet by Ginette Vincendeau, Paris, 10 April 1987, my translation. All subsequent quotations from Buet are from the same interview.

⁷ Joan Copjec, 'The Delirium of Clinical Perfection', *The Oxford Literary Review*, 'Sexual Difference' issue, vol 8 nos 1-2, 1986, p 58.

⁸ Lisa Jardine, 'Girl Talk (for Boys on the Left), or Marginalising Feminist Critical Praxis', *The Oxford Literary Review*, 'Sexual Difference' issue, vol 8 nos 1-2, 1986.

⁹ See Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, London, Methuen, 1985, chapter on 'French feminist theory', pp 89-167.

¹⁰ First published in Teresa de Lauretis and Stephen Heath (eds), *The Cinematic Apparatus*, London, Macmillan 1980, reprinted in Jacqueline Rose, *Sexuality in the Field of Vision*, London, Verso 1986. Reference to the latter edition, p 200.

¹¹ For example in Ropars, Lagny and Sorlin's book on French films in the 1930s, *Généralité des années 30*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de Vincennes, 1986. See also *Iris*' two volumes on 'The Current State of Theory', vol 1, no 1, and vol 1, no 2, 1st and 4th quarters of 1983. As far as I am aware, the only mention of the impact of feminism on film theory in these two volumes is in an article by David Rodowick on avant-garde modernism. Some articles in *Iris* are published in English, thus making the non-import of feminist film theory even more curious.

¹² Dana Polan, 'Desire Shifts the

These very doubts, however, indicate a level of engagement between feminism and theory, a mutual commitment, as it were. Feminists find it useful to work with certain theories, while Anglophone film theory incorporates feminist positions and strategies – even if some feminists have their doubts about the rise of the 'male critic in drag'⁸.

Such an engagement between feminism and theory – however problematic – has not occurred in French film theory, which is in any case fairly resistant to Anglophone influences; language being part, but not all, of the problem. The main paradox here for an international audience is that theoretical feminism is, for many, also identified as 'French', through the works of Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray, to name the most prominent (though Cixous and Kristeva's feminism, as understood in Anglo-Saxon terms, is also a matter of debate, to say the least). In literature and psychoanalysis, these writers have reclaimed the feminine through a theorisation of the female body and the concept of *écriture féminine*. It's interesting, though, that apart from Irigaray's notorious challenge to Lacan, these women have been rather reluctant to 'take on' the male cultural pantheon, as Toril Moi points out⁹. They have scarcely turned their attention to theory in relation to the cinema. For French film academics – men or women – feminism and sexual difference are, precisely, not theoretical. Some years ago, Jacqueline Rose argued that, in the work of Jean-Louis Comolli and Christian Metz of the '70s 'the concept of sexual difference functions as "the vanishing point" of the theory'.¹⁰ More recent academic film theory, still largely influenced by semiotics, collapses sexual difference into the extra-textual (the *hors-texte*), or, worse, the 'sociological', and avoids issues of gender, even when investigating areas where it seems, at least outside France, absolutely central. This is the case, for example, of two excellent new film journals, *Iris* and *Hors Cadre*, which contain several articles on spectatorship, voyeurism and the gaze, without any mention of sexual difference, or in the brilliant textual analyses by such scholars as Marie-Claire Ropars, Michèle Lagny and Pierre Sorlin, which tend to stop short whenever gender raises its head¹¹. For instance, though some of Marie-Claire Ropars' recent work incorporates a deconstructionist discussion of sexual difference, as Dana Polan puts it:

*While [Ropars'] argument has the advantage (like Stephen Heath's not dissimilar notion of 'Difference') of constructing the potential for a revolutionary theory of difference in its escape from the collapse of sexuality onto biology, the argument does not explain why collapses and restraints occur.*¹²

The reception of the work of Raymond Bellour on both sides of the Atlantic offers a salient example of the French reluctance to address sexual difference in its theoretico-political dimension. Bellour's writing, as many readers are aware, has been a key source in the journal of feminism and film theory, *Camera Obscura*.¹³ Yet a long discussion of it in a French film journal makes no mention of sexual difference, and relegates feminist analyses (such as Maureen Turim's 'Gentlemen Con-

sume Blondes') in a collection of essays edited by Bellour to 'ideological or socio-sexual analysis'¹⁴. Similarly, in a 1982 issue of *CinémAction* on the state of film theory, a piece on (Anglo-American) feminist theory finds its place in the 'cinema and society' section, while an interview with Bellour appears under the heading 'cinema and signs'.

It's not difficult to ascribe this elision of sexual difference from film theory to the larger cultural context: France is still an openly patriarchal and sexist society, where women intellectuals on the whole have to emulate male models to get recognition. But institutional factors are not restricted to France; Anglo-Saxon feminist academics' interest in French (male) theory derives in part from a need for legitimacy. Some would argue, though, that this is a useful strategy which at least gets feminism on the university map, unfortunately not the case in France. There, the distance between academic film studies and a women's film festival is much greater than that which separates the Latin Quarter from the suburbs. No wonder Parisian film academics don't go to Créteil.

The occluding of gender and sexual difference as theoretical categories is also in evidence in *cinéphile* journals such as *Cahiers du Cinéma* and *Positif* (and, *a fortiori*, in popular magazines like *Première*) – with one, alas, token exception in Françoise Audé, who reviews some women's films in *Positif* and has published interviews with directors such as Aline Issermann and Valeria Sarmiento¹⁵. Audé is a feminist but one who is, avowedly, non-theoretical, and she belongs to the libertarian, polemical, tradition of *Positif*. But her work is also marginalised within that journal as she appears to review mainly women's films. Whatever their historical internal antagonisms, *Cahiers* and *Positif* (and others) still firmly put the emphasis on the *auteur*, within a romantic tradition of humanist individualism which constitutes the bedrock of French critical approaches to film¹⁶, and which currently suppresses other considerations, such as ideology. Interestingly, the much admired work on ideology done by *Cahiers* and others in the '70s has fallen into the same kind of critical disrepute, or indifference, as feminism. Reviews of contemporary films in French journals are in this respect indicative. An avoidance of ideology in films is often commented on positively and, by a perverse logic, films that engage with a particular political or sociological position are either criticised (as old-fashioned) or praised for the extent to which they *avoid* such positions. For example, Françoise Audé reports how Aline Issermann's *Le Destin de Juliette* – a film which recounts the slow and painful emancipation of a woman whose life is overdetermined by an alcoholic father and husband, insane mother, suicidal brother and uncooperative social services – has been praised by French critics for its 'remoteness from naturalism, feminism, miserabilism, sociological dryness, melodrama, narrow psychology, stuffy intimacy'¹⁷. One wonders what is left. A *Positif* review of Pomme Meffre's *Le Grain de sable* (the story of a woman, played by Delphine Seyrig, who is driven to suicide by unemployment) praises it 'above all for what it is not: a film about unemployment or the female condition'¹⁸. I could go on.

The low currency of feminism in France also derives from the general

Difference": Figural Poetics and Figural Politics in the Film Theory of Marie-Claire Ropars', *Camera Obscura*, no 12, p 82.

¹³ Articles by Bellour were published in *Camera Obscura* no 2, no 3/4 (which also contains an interview with him by Janet Bergstrom), no 8-9-10, and no 11.

¹⁴ Joel Magny, 'Théories du cinéma', *Cinéma* 82 nos 280 and 281.

¹⁵ Audé is also the author of the only book-length study of women and French cinema, *Ciné-modèles, cinéma d'elles*, Lausanne, l'Âge d'homme, 1981.

¹⁶ Susan Boyd-Bowman confirms that this is the case even in the avant-garde broadcasting unit INA; see her 'Imaginary Cinémathèques: the Postmodern Programmes of INA', in *Screen*, Spring 1987, vol 28 no 2, pp 103-117.

¹⁷ *Positif* no 273, November 1983, p 6.

¹⁸ *Positif* no 274, December 1983, p 74.



¹⁹ Recent accounts in English of the French women's movement can be found in Claire Duchén, *Feminism in France From May '68 to Mitterrand*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986, and Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, op cit.

²⁰ Centre Audiovisuel Simone de Beauvoir, 29 rue du Colisée, 75008 Paris (tel: 42.25.17.75). The 1987 Créteil catalogue also lists a lesbian video library, *ARCL*, BP 662, 75331 Paris Cedex 11 (tel: 48.05.25.89), and a women's video company, Vidéo Out, 32, rue Maurice Ripoché, 75014 Paris (tel: 45.40.82.32).

²¹ Though there is a much discussed project for an imminent seventh (cultural) channel, 'la Sept', partly modelled on Channel 4.

decline in political militancy both as an activity and a theoretical approach. Political mobilisation in contemporary France tends to be on an *ad hoc*, isolated basis (e.g., the successful schoolchildren's demonstrations of December 1986) rather than in terms of organised groups or parties – one reason why feminism has not achieved the status of an alternative voice, even under the Socialist government which featured a Ministry for Women's Rights, now no longer in existence.

Anglophone countries have recently witnessed a boom in feminist and women's publishing, with practically every publisher boasting a 'women's list'. The same has not happened in France, where specific women's output in print is small and highly polarised. The choice is between the ultra-chic Editions des Femmes (and their equally chic St Germain des Prés bookshop, Librairie des Femmes) created by the Psych et Po splinter group of the French Women's movement (MLF¹⁹), and the smudgy stencils of *Paris-Féministe*, the bulletin of the Maison des Femmes. This last, situated in the less fashionable eleventh *arrondissement*, is a women's centre with the organisational and financial problems familiar to similar ventures in Britain. In French film-making, the dichotomy between affluent chic and struggling marginality tends to translate itself into colour features on the one hand and videos on the other. These videos, usually of a militant-informative nature, are made and distributed by a few groups and organisations, principally the Centre Simone de Beauvoir²⁰ which was created in June 1982 by three women, one of them Delphine Seyrig, in the enthusiastic climate of the early Socialist government and Ministry for Women's Rights. This independent production centre remains marginal and does not have the television outlet offered in Britain by Channel 4²¹. The higher cultural status of film in France also means less interest in videos which are not shown, for instance, at Créteil, nor listed in its catalogue. In the rest of

this article, I, too, will concentrate on the production of feature films.

The current position of French women film-makers could be described as falling between two stools. On the one hand, they lack a credible ideological framework in terms of group allegiance, on the other, they still hold only marginal positions in the industry – even women with the career and reputation of Agnès Varda who recently declared:

*with each film I have to fight like a tiger. They don't want me. . . . Oh, I'm a perfect cultural gadget, they have me in all libraries and cinémathèques. I'll be unforgotten. But they don't want me to make films. . . . they do films to make money.*²²

This means, for most women, working in low and medium budget features. It is logical in this context that the defence of *auteur* cinema should have become the political issue, as the point of resistance against economic strictures and industrial changes represented by three *bêtes noires*: Hollywood, French super-productions (e.g., Claude Berri's *Jean de Florette*), and the ever-encroaching power of television. As a recent editorial in *Cahiers* put it, 'Nowadays a film no longer does well, or is no longer produced, for itself, but for its potential in terms of media refraction . . . as if cinema wasn't enough in itself.'²³ Given that the model for the *auteur* is still the individual genius, or at least the artist driven by 'internal necessity' towards self-expression, this has had the paradoxical result of pushing French women directors into heightened individualism on the one hand and alignment with male 'colleagues' on the other. The refrain from the French women directors at Créteil was 'men have the same problems'. (By comparison, German women have so far been more successful in articulating *auteur* cinema with a collectively-claimed identity as women.) A few French women do seem to be aware of the crippling effect of this individualism, for example Jeanne Labrune, director of four features and ten medium-length and short films, but whose work has only so far been shown on television. Labrune recognises that:

*Our history is different from that of German film-makers who received help as women, and who structured themselves as such right from the start. Thus they have a collective identity which has allowed them to make claims for themselves as women film-makers with a positive image, because they have fought collectively. The French inability to think collectively means that French women cannot experience their practice in any other way than as auteurs, thinking that they are doing very well out of this individualistic game, whereas very often they are at the same time being 'had', in terms of their contracts, of distribution, etc.*²⁴

The problem isolated by Labrune operates in all areas. The absence of a feminist distribution network precludes any positive promotion of films as 'women's' products, while mainstream distributors handling women's films treat them as low-priority commodities, even in the case of directors of the stature of Marguerite Duras or Yannick Bellon²⁵.

²² Interview with Agnès Varda by Barbara Quart, *Film Quarterly*, vol 15 no 2, Winter '86-'87, p 10.

²³ *Cahiers du Cinéma* editorial, no 391, January 1987, p 2.

²⁴ Unpublished interview with Jeanne Labrune by Joelle Touitou, Paris, April 1987. Subsequent quotes from Labrune from the same interview, my translation.

²⁵ A point brought home to me while organising a season of films by French women directors at the National Film Theatre, London; 'Elles', a decade of French women directors, June 1987.

Finally, the same paradox – refusing a collective identity but suffering the drawbacks of an individualistic stance – is evident in the area of press coverage, a point vividly brought out at the Franco-German conference organised by the Goethe Institute at Créteil during the festival. Aline Issermann spoke of the ‘hysterical’ response by male critics to her second film *L’Amant magnifique*, but later launched a virulent attack on film theory and criticism – feminist or otherwise.

The usefulness of this year’s conference, ‘Rencontres: Cinéastes Berlinoises, Cinéastes Parisiennes’ was undermined by a low level of French participation. Apart from a fleeting visit by Akerman, there was only one Francophone director there (Issermann), compared to a substantial German presence: Helma Sanders-Brahms, Jutta Bruckner, Ulrike Ottinger, Ula Stockl and Helga Reidemeister. And a session on the function of theory and criticism in relation to women’s cinema was not attended by a single woman working for a French publication, not surprisingly given the male stronghold on film journals’ editorial boards (despite Françoise Maupin’s optimistic assertion in the 1987 Créteil catalogue of the rising number of women in the French press). The fate of the conference in some ways echoed that of the festival, with rumours of various ideological conflicts – mutual boycott between the festival and French directors, and a history of similarly frustrated attempts at international meetings involving French women.

In the same way, the French, or rather francophone, directors’ evening, billed as one of the high points of the festival, turned out to be an acute disappointment, both because of the low turn-out of ‘star’ French names (indeed only Akerman, as ‘honorary’ French woman, fitted in that category), and of the variously offhand, unsisterly or downright hostile attitudes of those on stage – with the exception of French-Canadian directors, clearly more in tune with Anglo-American feminism. But, whatever their attitude towards feminism, French women are making more feature films than those in other countries. What formal, industrial and ideological strategies they adopt are, therefore, of interest both for French cinema and for women’s film practice.

In a non-competition slot, Créteil, for the second year running, offered a selection of twelve films by French women directors, all fairly recent, except Varda’s *Cléo de 5 à 7* (1962). The other films in this selection were: Yannick Bellon’s *La Triche*, Diane Kurys’ *Coup de foudre*, Maud Linder’s *L’Homme au chapeau de soie* (a documentary on her father, Max Linder), Véra Belmont’s *Rouge Baiser*, Danièle Dubroux’s *Les Amants terribles*, Juliet Berto’s *Neige*, Camille de Casabianca’s *Pékin-Central*, Christine Laurent’s *Vertiges*, Claire Devers’ *Noir et blanc*, Aline Issermann’s *L’Amant magnifique* and Marie-Claude Treilhou’s *Il était une fois la télé*. All these films, with the exception of *Cléo de 5 à 7* and *Coup de foudre*, have only been shown on the festival circuit outside France. The 1986 selection included, beside works by some of the above directors, films by Marguerite Duras, Jeanne Labrune, Euzhan Palcy, Annick Lanoé, Irène Jouannet, Pomme Meffre, Charlotte Silvera, and Coline Serreau. A few others were shown in the June 1987 NFT season in Lon-

don (Berto's *Havre*, Caroline Roboh's *Clémentine Tango*, and Geneviève Lefebvre's *Le Jupon rouge*). Also included was Akerman's *The Golden Eighties*. Though by no means exhaustive, this selection gives an overview of recent work by French women as a base for what follows and as a possible counterbalance to Akerman's contention about the obsolescence of 'women's cinema'.



Coup de foudre,
directed by Diane
Kurys.

'I want to explore all the possibilities of my aesthetic project.' Jeanne Labruné's professed aim could serve as a motto for French women directors in the '80s, somewhat in contrast to the ideological objectives of the '70s, with films on rape (Bellon's *L'Amour violé*), changing sexual roles (Serreau's *Pourquoi pas*), or feminism itself (Varda's *L'Une chante, l'autre pas*, *One Sings, the Other Doesn't*). That women's cinema cannot be equated with feminist cinema is now a commonplace, but it is perhaps in France that the separation is most obvious. Clearly it is no coincidence that it is there that women have achieved the highest (pathetically small though it is) degree of integration into mainstream cinema – in this case art cinema, which in France still constitutes an 'alternative mainstream'.

La Triche, *Coup de foudre*, *Rouge Baiser*, *Le Destin de Juliette*, *Trois Hommes et un couffin*, *Le Jupon rouge*, *Vertiges*, *Sans toit ni loi* (*Vagabond*), are variations on medium-budget art cinema²⁶ with high production values for the genre: tasteful photography, decors and music, stars – mostly French – like Isabelle Huppert, Miou-Miou, Lambert Wilson, Alida Valli, Marie-Christine Barrault, Sandrine Bonnaire, and, in the case of *Coup de foudre* and *Rouge Baiser*, both set in the '50s, careful period recreation. In this respect, women's films continue the tradition of French *auteur* cinema, a classic realist cinema, little inclined

²⁶ Where almost half of the 97 feature films made in France in 1986 had a budget between 10 and 20 million FF, the budgets of 11 features directed by French women in 1986 break down as: 10-20 million FF, three; 8-10 million FF: two; 5-8 million FF: four; 3-5 million FF, two.

²⁷ Unpublished interview with Geneviève Lefebvre by Ginette Vincendeau, Créteil, April 1987, my translation.

to explore the fantastic or the grotesque, an 'intimate' cinema which focuses on psychological motivation and behaviour rather than the historico-social referent. Varda's *Sans toit ni loi*, for instance, despite its precisely observed milieu, is less a sociological statement on post-'68 France than an exploration of an individual's journey and the mythical resonances of that theme. Geneviève Lefebvre, director of *Le Jupon rouge* (*Manuela's Loves*), the story of close relationships between three women, recently declared that the – scanty – historical background to her three characters, one of whom has been in a concentration camp, was there just

*to locate [the characters] in terms of their jobs. I would have loved to make an allegorical film without any reference to the social, but that's difficult. I will try to do it in my second film.*²⁷

Sans toit ni loi
(*Vagabond*), directed
by Agnès Varda.



Lefebvre's aspiration is completely consistent with the critical climate and charts a similar trajectory to that of other women who have completed their first film. It is the case, for instance, of Issermann, whose second film *L'Amant magnifique* focuses on sexual passion, and for Juliet Berto (whose first film, *Neige*, portrays immigrants and drugs in a seedy part of Montmartre). Even allowing for the fact that drug-peddling is a generically overdetermined area, both in the gangster-thriller and in French narratives of the 'lower depths', it is significant that Berto's subsequent two features, and in particular the latest, *Havre*, have departed from this precisely coded milieu, to arrive at a rather obscure allegorical 'postmodern' puzzle, where the decor of the harbour and the characters act as pawns in a game devised on a video screen.

An insistence on the personal is another clue to understanding French women's difficulties in connecting with feminism. In French women's

cinema there has not been the intense engagement with their country's history found in German (films by Sanders-Brahms and von Trotta particularly) or Latin American cinema. There are, of course, exceptions, such as Vera Belmont's *Rouge Baiser*. This semi-autobiographical film recreates the Communist milieu of the early '50s, but uses the period more as background to the young heroine's personal development than as it subject; it also feeds off '50s nostalgia – St Germain des Prés night-clubs, jazz, etc. It is, however, one of the rare occurrences in French cinema of a fiction film explicitly dealing with Left ideology, and, even rarer, with a woman at its centre. *Rouge Baiser* also investigates the lives of immigrants (Eastern European Jews) in France, as does Charlotte Silvera's autobiographical *Louise l'insoumise* (which studies the North African Jewish milieu in a Parisian suburb in the early '60s). It remains to be seen whether Belmont and Silvera will follow the Issermann/Berto route or continue their investigation of the interaction between personal story and history²⁸. It is no accident that immigrants figure largely in both films. They do so even more directly in Euzhan Palcy's *Rue Cases-Nègres*, which looks at the French colonial past of the 1930s.²⁹ Otherwise, an interest in the social would seem to be confined to a few documentary features, such as Nicole Le Garrec's *Plogoff* (the resistance of a village against a nuclear power station) or Marie-Claude Treilhou's *Il était une fois la télé* (the impact of the media on a small community).

An important aspect of French *auteur* theory is that it has always built strong connections between film-makers, artists and intellectuals, from Louis Delluc, Marcel L'Herbier, Germaine Dulac as far back as the '20s, to the present day through; among others, Cocteau, Robbe-Grillet, and the New Wave. Such a tradition, which values originality above all, encompasses women like Varda and Duras, but also Yannick Belon, Aline Issermann, Christine Laurent, Juliet Berto and Jeanne Labrune. It is a cinema which is clearly open to accusations of excessive aestheticism and elitism, as in the case of Labrune's films. Both her *La Digue* and *La Part de l'autre* are beautiful and intriguing, but the subjects explored (a woman's relationship to her father in the case of the former, sexual ambivalence in male twins in the latter) are undermined by the remoteness of the symbolism and the concentration on 'timeless' elements – wind, sea, etc – however photogenic. But what might be perceived as 'self-indulgent' personal exploration can from a different point of view be seen as exploratory research. *Auteur* cinema in France has always acted as a support system to women like Duras and Varda, who have been able to pursue careers, albeit precarious ones; though, of course, the perpetual threatened state of *auteur* cinema, and thus the need for its defence, are part of it own myth.

A corollary of the *auteur*'s splendid isolation is remoteness from the audience. The possibility of making films without an eye on the box-office is no doubt 'liberating' in allowing experiment. Such an attitude is fostered in France by state and industry subsidies, particularly the famous *avance sur recettes* (advance on box-office receipts). Roughly 40 films a year have benefited from it since its creation in 1959, and there is

²⁸ Silvera's next project is a film set in a women's prison. Belmont, an avowed Marxist, is continuing her longstanding (22 years) career as a producer of *auteur* films.

²⁹ A recent issue of *CinémaAction*, June 1987, no 43, 'Les Cinémas arabes', indicates that a few films directed by North African women deal with the issue of women and immigration, but they have not yet found distribution outlets in France.

Le Part de l'autre,
directed by Jeanne
Labrune.



no doubt that it has been a driving force behind 'creative' cinema in France. The *avance* tends to favour 'young' directors and as a result an unusually large number of first films get made, which benefits women. But the encouragement to make films relatively free from box-office constraints contains its own weakness in removing the need to conceptualise a specific audience, something which has been of enormous importance to women's cinema in Britain and Germany. Hence many French directors' impatient or franky bored attitude when asked to discuss their films with the Créteil audience, an activity which Chantal Akerman brutally and revealingly described as 'after-sales service'. This attitude to audiences is reactionary and self-defeating because another term in the equation is fast altering the rules of the game – television. Though snobbishly ignored by most of the French film establishment (and by Créteil³⁰), television has become one of the forces of French cinema, as elsewhere. As Labrune puts it: 'All *auteur* cinema is now made with television money'. Though many of their films get shown by the voracious six French channels, women still have to engage with the medium other than just as a source of funds – for example as a means of reaching a different audience than that of the *art et essai* circuit. So far, few women have been willing to do so; exceptions include Labrune, whose last two features *La Digue* and *Le Part de l'autre*, were made for television³¹, and Varda with her series on photography, *Une minute pour une image*.

There are other strategies open to French women willing to break out of the traditional *auteur* cinema mould. One is by way of international co-production. Diane Kurys, whose *Coup de foudre* succeeded as an international art product, shot her latest film, *Une Homme amoureux*, at Rome's Cinecittà, with an international cast (Peter Coyote, Greta Scacchi, Jamie Lee Curtis, Claudia Cardinale). Similarly, Nathalie

³⁰ Though Jackie Buet told me that there would be a television section at Créteil, in 1988 or 1989.

³¹ According to Labrune, this was more from necessity than choice, though she is eloquent on the relative merits of the two and is currently trying to set up an international television co-production with reciprocal broadcasting agreements.

Delon's *Sweet Lies* was partly shot in Hollywood with a Franco-American cast. As neither has been commercially released at the time of writing, it is difficult to predict the outcome of this new departure, though the history of French directors working in Hollywood is not encouraging. In any case, the number of French women who can command such major productions is tiny; Coline Serreau is one, though she has just turned down the offer to remake her *Trois Hommes et un couffin* (*Three Men and a Cradle*) in Hollywood. On the home market, a few are trying the different strategy of working in a popular genre, which in France primarily means comedy. This is where Serreau has been so successful with *Trois Hommes et un couffin* (like Doris Dörrie with *Men* in Germany); the less than enthusiastic response to Serreau's film outside France shows how much, despite its (post?) feminist content, it really is an old-fashioned French comedy, a genre which has never travelled well. In a less competent – because less experienced – way, Camille de Casabianca's *Pékin-Central* and Annick Lanoë's *Les Nanas* tread the same path. Both are comedies which incorporate elements of feminism, but whereas Casabianca's is an amusing, if slender, comedy of manners which aims some well-deserved digs at French *machismo*, Lanoë's does little more than turn 'liberated' women into the worn-out clichés of trendy women's magazines. Though she was loathe to discuss it at Créteil, Akerman's last film, *The Golden Eighties*, also indicates a move towards popular genres, in this case the musical.

Are women 'breaking new ground' anywhere in French cinema? A better way of posing the question would be to ask whether anyone in French cinema is. Constantly on the look-out for new *auteurs*, *Cahiers* (and to a lesser extent *Positif*) are quick – sometimes too quick – to point to emerging talents (e.g., Léos Carax), but in recent years more interesting films have been directed by men 'of a certain age': Pialat, Rohmer, Godard, Resnais. Similarly, the most remarkable recent film by a French woman director is probably Varda's *Sans toit ni loi*, while Marguerite Duras continues her very personal exploration of film language.

In a period of transition, some younger women are attempting to steer a course between New Wave-style *auteur* cinema and box-office popular genres by appealing to a knowing, trendy, and most importantly, *young* audience – in what a *Cahiers* critic has called the 'Forum des Halles' genre. The image of the Parisian shopping precinct symbolises the hip, 'postmodern', and certainly 'post-feminist' fauna that can be seen at the Café Costes, for example. Films such as those directed by Beneix, Besson and Carax blatantly cater for such a clientele. French women directors have followed the trend, by taking on soft-core eroticism and androgyny, neatly combining 'post-feminist' attitudes to gender with a certain sexual explicitness. In this category fall films such as Virginie Thévenet's *La Nuit porte jarretelles*, and *Jeux d'artifice*³², Caroline Roboh's *Clémentine Tango*, Arielle Dombasle's *La Novice*, Dominique Crevecoeur's *Contes Clandestins*, and Claire Devers' *Noir et blanc*. *La Nuit porte jarretelles* and *Clémentine Tango* have both achieved cult status (the latter on the festival circuit). With a student film look about

³² Thévenet's titles draw attention to the 'cleverness' of her films. Both are puns: the first one is on a proverb (*la nuit porte conseil*, nightly sleep gives good advice) and the French word for suspender-belt (*portejarretelles*). The title of the second film is a pun on fireworks (*Jeux d'artifice*), and on playing and artificiality. It is in relation to her first film that the *Cahiers* critic employed the description of the 'Forum des Halles' style.

it, *Clémentine Tango* is a collage of cabaret acts by various transvestite artists, including a highly ambiguous couple (Arturo Brachetti and Josephine Larsen). Some of the acts are delightful, and the characterisation of the young hero as upper-class twit in search of his father's lost mistress and of his repressed blue-stocking sister (played by Roboh) in pure *roman-photo* manner is hilarious if one accepts the camp-parodic style.

Clémentine Tango,
directed by Caroline
Roboh.



Ultimately though, despite the insistence on gender-bending, which the characters (except the hero and his sister) share, the play on sexual ambiguity remains just that. The exploration of sexuality in these films is less than subversive and could merit the accusation that taking on explicit eroticism is another way of getting male recognition. *Noir et blanc*, directed by Claire Devers, is a far-reaching and grim exploration of a sado-masochistic relationship between a black and a white man (loosely based on a story by Tennessee Williams). Though the film was shot on a shoe-string, Devers' *mise-en-scène* is complex in its handling of space, and its (black and white) photography. What, in the end, is disquieting is that, in *Noir et blanc* as in *Clémentine Tango*, the most parodied figures are women. Disquieting, too, is the fact that, apart from *Noir et blanc*, *Rue Cases-Nègres*, Berto's films and *Louise l'insoumise*, French women's films are overwhelmingly white, middle-class and, apart from *Le Jupon rouge*, heterosexual. This may be due to the difficulty for French women directors of finding a credible position from which to explore problems of gender and class without being accused of producing old-fashioned sociological statements. Between a rearguard battle to uphold conventional *auteur* cinema on the one hand, and the postmodern, fashionable avoidance of clear gender positions on the other, women directors in France have short-circuited both the possibil-

ity of organised struggle (or at least of meaningful gender positioning within their film practice) and of a politics of representation.

In the absence of ideological consensus, how can a festival like Créteil become anything other than a show-case for foreign films? The way chosen by its organisers is to pursue a policy of seeking increased recognition as a *film* festival as opposed to a *women's* film festival. It is not the easiest way, as Buet recognises:

In the years to come we will seriously have to ask ourselves the question of the festival's objective at the level of film promotion, and that is the most difficult aspect of all, as it's the one least known to us.

The contradictions of a women's/film festival on this scale are most apparent in promotion and distribution. In the case of films by French distributors, as Buet puts it,

either the film is going to be distributed theatrically, or the director goes for Cannes; in either case they don't care about us, which I understand very well.

Foreign directors support Créteil more enthusiastically – up to a point. Mainstream films, even with feminist content (e.g., *Desperately Seeking Susan*), are out of reach, and this year Créteil was only able to show Helma Sanders-Brahms' *Laputa* as a première at high financial cost just before its Parisian release. There is a danger of Créteil's intervention on the French film market ending up as no more than a way of proving to distributors that women's films are not necessarily a hopeless commercial proposition. Buet notes that

They all say that there is no space on the market, no public. But we say there's a festival with 26,000 spectators [an increase of 1,000 on 1986].

How the category 'women's cinema' is seen by the French press is part and parcel of this, and it is there that the lack of feminist film culture is most acutely felt. Media attitudes to Créteil include moronic attacks on the festival for 'excluding men's films'³³ and a concentration, in the quality press (*Libération*, *Le Matin*), on star *auteurs* – this year Vera Chytilova, Mai Zetterling and a retrospective of Colette and the cinema. The lack of theorisation shows, for instance, in a piece in *Le Monde*³⁴ entitled 'Women's films, the low ebb', which criticises the films at Créteil for their banality, while discussing only the films that received prizes, and providing no context for considering the festival. It just isn't possible to equate Créteil's choice – and even less the prizewinning films – with 'women's cinema'. The selection is dubiously representative given the set of factors guiding the choice. These are both objective – no prior release in France – and subjective – a hazy notion of 'balance' between countries as well as within particular countries if the production is substantial enough. As in 1986, prizes went to competent but safe (not to say conventional) art films: Ann Wheeler's *Loyalties* (Canada),

³³ Some sections, such as films from other French festivals, have been introduced partly to alleviate this attack, as they do contain films by men. The presence of men on the jury is part of a similar strategy, but also of a desire to involve men in women's issues.

³⁴ *Le Monde*, April 8, 1987.

³⁵ See the interview with Sheila McLaughlin by Alison Butler in this issue.

³⁶ This year's budget was FF 2million (£200,000) with large contributions from various state and local grants. The demise of the Ministry for Women's Rights meant a shortfall which was compensated for by a new grant from the (Communist-led) Regional Council of the Val-de-Marne.

³⁷ Fourteen lycées in France are participating in this experiment.

Agneta Fagerstrom-Olsson's *Seppan* (Sweden), Suzanne Osten's *The Mozart Brothers* (Sweden), and the documentary feature *They Are Orchestra Conductors* (Christina Olofson), while more experimental works, including Sheila McLaughlin's *She Must Be Seeing Things*³⁵, fared badly with both public and jury.

So, is there any point in Créteil continuing? Well, yes. Créteil remains the only European forum for women's films to have the financial means³⁶ to attract an international audience and sample of films, with all that that means in terms of contacts for film-makers and audience. As in 1986, an array of parallel events was staged, which contributed to the richness of the festival. This year my favourite was a press conference given by the pupils of the Lycée Léon Blum in Créteil – coincidentally situated on the rue Jean Gabin – where a pilot scheme for teaching film studies and film-making in secondary education was recently started³⁷, one of whose teachers is Françoise Audé. The pupils handled their conference very professionally and showed a cassette of one of their films. Their knowledge and enthusiasm were a credit to their course and a comfort for the future of film culture in France. However, the fact that practically the whole shooting team, and those who spoke at the conference, were boys (the lycée is co-ed) is a sharp reminder that the notion of a 'women's cinema' is not as outdated as some of the participants at Créteil seem to assume.

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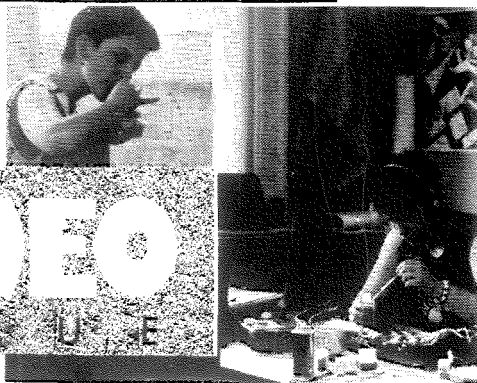
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'SHE MUST BE SEEING THINGS'

AN INTERVIEW WITH SHEILA MCLAUGHLIN
BY ALISON BUTLER

¹ Elizabeth Cowie, 'Fantasia', *m/f* 9, 1984, pp 71-104 and Donald Greig, 'The Sexual Differentiation of the Hitchcock Text', *Screen* Winter 1987, vol 28 no 1, pp 28-46.

² See her photo-essay in this issue.

³ Laura Mulvey, 'Changes: Thoughts on Myth, Narrative and Historical Experience', *History Workshop*, Issue 23, Spring 1987, p 7.

⁴ The 1987 Créteil International Women's Film Festival.

NEW FEMINIST CINEMA has emerged under interesting but often difficult conditions. As well as the usual problems of entry for women into traditionally male-dominated cultural and industrial spheres, it has had to bear the additional burden of working alongside the paralysing paradigms of a feminist cultural theory in which historical diagnoses have tended to harden into proscriptive dogma (e.g., that the gaze is inevitably voyeuristic, exploitative and male, and that these terms are, to some extent, interchangeable. That fetishistic modes of producing meaning are absolutely unavailable to women, or at any rate, femininity. Etc . . .). Working within the confines of difference theory's binary structuration, feminist theory has become—for a time—gridlocked by its own conceptual topology. Recent work on fantasy (Elizabeth Cowie and others¹) and non-phallic fetishism (Laleen Jayamanne²) is beginning to show how this blockage might be dismantled, and to open new possibilities for a feminist cinema which is both visually pleasurable and politically radical (i.e., which might recoup some of 'the endless loss inherent in the "tradition of the new"'³).

Sheila McLaughlin's first fiction feature (she co-directed *Committed* with Lynne Tillman), *She Must Be Seeing Things*, is not a theory film, but it occupies a terrain on which the concerns of feminist theory are unavoidable. Narrating its story of a lesbian relationship troubled by intimations of heterosexuality, it progresses through fantasy scenarios which articulate the movement of women's desires across different discursive registers. As a narrative film, it of course makes use of the structuring binarisms to which narrative can always be resolved, but by playing with polar oppositions, re-working and re-contextualising them, it reminds us that social reality, unlike the classical narrative, is non-binary and heterogeneous, and that a code is not the destiny of the history that mobilises it but only the trace of the histories that precede it.

Alison Butler: *She Must Be Seeing Things* is one of the few films I've seen in this festival⁴ which doesn't concentrate on the oppression of women by men, either in a personal sense, or socially and culturally under

*patriarchy. It's a lively, positive film which deals with the areas of some women's lives where questions of power and identity are open to negotiation to some extent. In this it's very different from your previous film, **Committed**, which dealt with the oppression of one woman, Frances Farmer, under various patriarchal institutions: the family, the Hollywood star system, the mental hospital. Does this change of emphasis in your work follow a shift – or a split – in North American feminist discourses away from histories of oppression and towards notions of empowerment?*

Sheila McLaughlin: I hope it represents a shift rather than a split. It's impossible to make a film that doesn't in any way relate to patriarchy and women's oppression, but what I wanted to do in this film was to foreground the relationship between the two women and then have that act in relation to male culture. I think it's positive because women have been talking about difference, sexuality and desire for a very short time, and I think that during the '60s and '70s we came into danger of becoming our own police and being extremely moralistic and judgmental about what one can and can't do as a 'feminist'. With this film, I'm saying that there's more than one way to be a feminist, there's more than one feminism. I wanted to open up the notions and possibilities of what women can do, to try to confront and be iconoclastic towards what have become lesbian and feminist taboos. And hopefully by confronting them, to begin to break down the power that they have, to digest them somehow. I don't think this represents a split; I think it's just a more open way of thinking about women's sexuality. It's dealing with notions of power between women and opening up questions of sado-masochism, bondage and so on. When Agatha goes to the sex store to look at dildoes, it's not really clear how much the two women participate in that together; she doesn't buy the dildo, but not because she's against it, she just doesn't buy it right then, she may in the future, who knows? I was trying



Forbidden pleasures:
Agatha at the sex
shop in *She Must Be
Seeing Things*.

to deal openly with the ultimate lesbian horror, the fantasy of having sex with a man. Having that fantasy doesn't necessarily mean that you're not a lesbian or you're a bad woman, or anything like that. I think that fantasy is inescapable, so I wanted to raise issues around that and confront them.

The film explores erotic lesbian imagery, but it does so neither in terms of a narcissistic relation of sameness nor in terms of an otherness from or previousness to patriarchal power relations that some radical separatists have preferred to use. Instead it plays with the given positions of sexual difference theory, masculine and feminine, defined against each other. In other words the film doesn't attempt to invent or discover a 'new language of desire', but rearticulates and – I think – subverts the existing codes in the dominant culture. Why did you choose to work this way?

Heterosexuality is the dominant code of the society that we live in, and it defines and in a sense creates our own sexuality, whether we choose to participate as literally heterosexual or not. I think it's somehow inescapable, that we're inextricably bound up with that. We've gone through a long time of trying to deny that, and yet it's important, if we ever want to get beyond that stage, to find a 'new language' or whatever you want to call it, to work through that in some sort of discourse before we can free ourselves from it, or figure out what our desire is or is about.

One new thing that's happened, at least in the North American lesbian scene, in the '80s – it started before, but now it's really started to come out – is the taking on again of butch-femme roles and playing with those, which was not approved of before. There was more of the 'clone' look and women were representing themselves to the world as each other, as like each other, looking the same. I think that it's a re-establishing of difference, which re-establishes a certain eroticism in relationships. Ruby Rich talks about this in her article 'Feminism and Sexuality in the 1980s'⁵. I think that taking on these roles is a way of subverting them, showing how fragile they really are. One of the reasons I cast the two women I did was that they really couldn't be more different from one another, even at the level of physical appearance. They use role-play to empower themselves in their own way rather than being victimised by it. I wanted to undermine the idea of women as narcissistic extensions of each other because I don't think it's true. That's not why women are together. Also, women have been thought of as having sex that's very 'nice', you know, like 'making nice', and it's very sweet and gentle, touchy-feely-kissy and almost pre-pubescent or something, and that's not what happens between women. It's so often thought of that way I think because of the absence of the phallus, since sex is thought of as a phallic thing. I wanted to bring out the eroticism between them, particularly in the seduction scene, and the aggression in their sex, to show that the strong attraction, the eroticism that's there is not just 'nice'; sex is to do with aggression.

⁵ *Feminist Studies*, vol 12 no 3, Fall 1986.

With the two parallel dressing-up sequences, where Jo puts on the silk underwear that Agatha gives her, and later, when Agatha dresses as a man in the sequence where she's following Jo because she suspects that Jo is sexually involved with a man, were you referring to notions of femininity (and masculinity) as masquerade?

It has to do with the butch-femme issues I was talking about. But when they dress as stereotypes, I wanted them to use their masquerades with a clear sense of irony. When Jo dresses in the baby-doll outfit, she allows for a stereotypical erotic response at the same time that her consciousness of that brings humour and irony to it. Similarly, Agatha dressing as a man masquerades as that which she is threatened by. In a way, she is using the disguise to do battle with the thing that she is disguised as. By representing herself in the image of the rival, she deflates it.

So the masquerade devices are used to suggest that gender-roles, like clothes, can be put on and, by implication, taken off, so that they aren't assumed as biologically determined, but as social constructs which are subject to variation and open to transformation?

I agree that gender is a social construction, you're not born with it. But its social construction determines what the possibilities are that one is given in the world today. Redefining ourselves as androgynous is something we can't do, at least not at this point; it hasn't been created and it's a very difficult thing to create, if at all possible. But that doesn't mean that you're fixed simply as 'masculine' or 'feminine': it's important in the film when Jo says to Agatha, 'do you really want a cock?' and she says, 'No. Yes. Maybe, sometimes, but I don't want to be a man.' You can play with these ideas, but it doesn't necessarily mean that you want



Unstable identities:
Jo in the cutting room
in *She Must Be Seeing
Things*.

to be a man, and I think that's the danger that some women feel, that if you take on that role it implies something that it doesn't necessarily have to, and it doesn't; a dildo is something that you can take on and off as well as a role. You can use it as you like and then discard it. Similarly, Jo at times appears as a sex object but that is also undermined by showing her in an active role, working on her film.

So you're really undermining notions of phallic power by playing with them and making a joke of them?

Yes, making fun of them. Like when Jo does her dance in her little baby-doll outfit, the camera starts off with a very 'male' point of view, as she does this traditional sex-strip dance. But it's undermined by the music that she puts on. The image-sound tension makes it into a very weird thing that she's doing, and she makes it absolutely ridiculous. Agatha laughs at it, and when Jo puts her stockings on, there's a hole in one of them and her foot goes through it. When a 'real' person does these things, they don't happen the way they're 'supposed to'. It makes a ridiculous scene of it, which is what I really wanted to do: I wanted to have the camera pan down her body and show her in this very stereotypical way and then make it ridiculous, constantly having things going on within the scene that would undermine that point of view and that stereotype and make fun of it.

One of the unusual things about the film is that it addresses the question of differences between women, rather than assuming a universal Female Subject. One of the most important differences between the two protagonists of the film is racial difference: Agatha is a Brazilian and Jo is an 'all-American' blonde, the ultimate WASP. Their differences give rise to a powerful mutual fascination. There's also a power dynamic working here: Agatha says that she wanted to possess Jo, but instead became possessed by her. I'm interested in whether you saw racial difference as an important issue, for example with regard to the distribution of roles and positionalities in the film. For example, Agatha seems quite 'male-identified', and even says at one point that she identified with her father rather than falling in love with him, whereas Jo is almost a Marilyn Monroe type. Both self-representations are survival strategies, but there seems to me to be more necessity involved in Agatha's assumption of a mask and more play in Jo's masquerade, which relates directly to the different levels of access to power which white women and women of colour usually get.

I don't think that racial difference is the most important difference between the two protagonists. For me the most important thing was that they be as different as possible and race is part of that. It is very difficult to represent a black/white relationship because the issue of race often dominates. Before I shot the film I considered reversing their roles and having Lois Weaver play Agatha and Sheila Dabney play Jo. As I was thinking about casting a black woman in that role, I tried to think of her

in various different roles. It seemed to me that she could be positioned in many different ways and, depending on one's point of view, all the roles could be read as racially problematic. If she had played Jo, she could have been stereotyped as the 'sexy black bitch', for example. As Agatha, she can be read as male-identified or she can be read as a strong professional woman, a lawyer operating in the world successfully, politically committed and doing something she has chosen to do. In the scene where she dresses as a man, what's important is not that she's a black dressing as a man, but that she's a woman dressing as a man and that's appropriate as part of the narrative in the film. Also, black actors want good roles in film and not to be cast simply for being black. Of course race is always an issue, but I personally felt an obligation and an interest in beginning to address that. For me it's a very difficult and important thing to do.



Erotic differences: Jo and Agatha in *She Must Be Seeing Things*.

*The question of the visual is central to the film, signalled by the title, **She Must Be Seeing Things**, and also by the fact that one of the protagonists is a film-maker, and that the final resolution comes about when they're looking at her film on the editing table. This resolution is structured as a re-vision of the Oedipal scenario with a 'happy ending', intercutting the sequence in the film-within-the-film where the young girl overlooks the couple in bed having sex which is interrupted when a man rushed in and knifes the man in bed and the young girl rescues the woman, with images of Agatha, distraught and caught up in her own jealous and fearful fantasies about Jo. The use of reverse-shot here interpolates Agatha into the film-within-the-film. Could you explain a bit about your use of notions of fantasy in the film?*

One thing I wanted to do formally in the film, when I was thinking about how to deal with Agatha's fantasies, whatever 'she must be see-

ing', was to make the images of what she 'sees' extremely realistic. I didn't want to go into other cinematic modes, with strange or surrealistic things going on, because in fact those fantasies are extremely real, even more real than 'real life'. I wanted to make it ambiguous at certain points in the film whether things are or aren't happening. Similarly, I tried to weave the film-within-the-film in as well, to make it work within the 'reality' of the contemporary story, to show how fantasy and 'reality' are irrevocably linked in these two lives. There are two obsessions going on in the film: there's Agatha's obsession, and there's Jo's obsession with her film, and these come together in the end. Jo is unaware of what Agatha has been going through, but at the same time she's making a film that strongly relates Agatha's experiences, so there's some kind of unconscious synchronicity going on. The film that Jo's making brings these elements together in the end. It's ironic that what this produces can be seen as a different version of the Oedipal situation, where instead of the woman killing the mother in order to take her place, to be with the father, the man is killed and the woman runs away with the woman. So, yes, it becomes a sort of happy ending.

The film-within-the-film is generically very removed from the contemporary context which frames it. Based on the Thomas De Quincy story of a seventeenth century nun who rebels against and runs away from the convent, it doesn't bear immediately on the situation of New York lesbians. Could you say a bit more about its function in the film?

When I first started making the film, that was the film I wanted to make. I was interested in the story of Catalina De Erauso, but then decided that I didn't want to make another period film about the life of one woman, and also, it would have been very expensive. There's a certain historical parallel between Catalina's necessitated male identification (she has to dress as a boy to protect herself outside the convent) and Agatha's, to less of an extent. The fact that Jo's making this film provides some resolution to the conflict between the two women at the level of fantasy and in the realist narrative. In the scene where Jo is directing and Agatha watching, Jo is completely in control of the situation: 'Catalina' is being directed by her, and Agatha, in a sense, is also, reacting with reference to the situation that Jo has set up. As Agatha witnesses the scene, she has the same reactions as those of the character whom Jo has created.

*As a film about voyeurism and the fascination of one woman for another, **She Must Be Seeing Things** is like the repressed fantasy of **Desperately Seeking Susan**, the film that some feminists wanted it to be. The voyeur-detective is becoming an increasingly common narrative figure in feminist film. To some extent, I think this has to do with the contradictions involved in being a feminist and loving the cinema, which, to date, has been largely made by, about and for men. Do you think that a non-voyeuristic women's cinema is possible?*

I think that's what cinema literally is, I mean the relationship between an audience and the images they're seeing on a screen makes it impossible for cinema to be non-voyeuristic. That's what so much of it's about. As to whether the voyeuristic gaze can be anything but male, I don't know. What I wanted to do in the film was to make a voyeuristic female and constantly put her in the position of taking on the look.

Did you intend to identify the look of the woman spectator with the look of Agatha?

The film is told from Agatha's point of view – we know what's going on inside her head. In the strip scene the camera is behind her back, so we're in the same position that she is; there's an attempt to take on her point of view. I don't think that it can completely displace a male point of view, but by camera position, there's an attempt to introduce a certain question or conflict about who's looking.

*Your film seems to belong to a small 'school' of New York independent films, including those of Bette Gordon and Lizzie Borden, which deal with questions of desire and sexuality which haven't yet been addressed much within the women's movement. Instead of the soft-focus sentimentality of *Lianna*, it refers to cross-dressing, butch-femme roles and bondage. Although it doesn't depict sex explicitly, its frame of reference makes it a risky film to have made – what were you hoping to add to the feminist agenda that's important enough to justify taking such a risk?*

As I said before, there are a lot of taboos that many feminists still hold onto, and if we don't confront them, we're limiting the possibilities of understanding our own sexuality and desire. It was this representational space I was trying to open up. I'm not the only one who's doing this. Lois Weaver who plays Jo in the film is one of the founding members and an important director of WOW (Women One World), a lesbian theatre company that works around these kind of issues and plays with them in a completely anarchic and outrageous fashion. This theatre and publications like *On Our Backs* are important elements which have a strong impact on the lesbian community in New York.

Have you had much feedback from men watching the film?

No, none at all. I literally just got it out of the lab and brought it straight here. This is the first screening. I have no idea what men are going to think, and that will be interesting in terms of distribution, because the people who make those decisions and have that power are mostly men, and I don't know that there's any way for them into the film.

Why did you choose to premiere the film at Créteil, given that quite a lot of women don't bring their films here first, perhaps because there isn't a market

or a tradition of easy access to markets and distribution outside of the feminist distributors?

That's why I did it. Since I just finished it I haven't worked out any real distribution strategy quite yet. Having been at Créteil before, where there was very little marketing, I thought it would be a good chance to see how women reacted to it, to see how controversial it would be, whether anyone would go for my jugular, or whether they would enjoy it.

Has anyone really attacked the film?

I think that perhaps people were a bit shocked at first. As I expected, some gay women were disturbed by the role-playing and the heterosexual fantasy in the film. I was speaking to some women from England who said that they'd been talking to some other English women after the screening. They'd said 'it was great, wasn't it?', and the other women answered, 'No! God!' But it was said in a way that was like 'what will people think?!

Maybe that's because the women's movement in England has become rather polite, perhaps because of its fragility in the current political climate.

It's not too polite a film, so hopefully it will engage more discussion than that.

As a woman film-maker working at the avant-garde edge of the American independent sector, is it difficult to get funding for projects?

Very, yes. It's especially difficult in America. I suppose the grass is always greener, but Europe seems better by comparison: you have much more government funding, television funding, and national film theatres where the stuff can get shown without the primary consideration being its commerciality. That doesn't exist so much in America. This film was funded by grants and German television, and I got just about everything I asked for. I know that won't ever happen again, and I don't know how I'll get funded. If I look for private funding, I don't know that they're going to want to fund someone who's made this film about a couple of dykes, with all this sex stuff and it's - you know - weird . . . it is very difficult.

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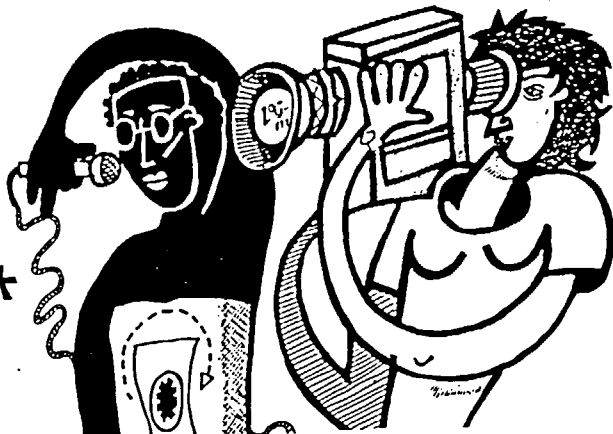
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MESSAGES IN A BOTTLE?

MIRIAM HANSEN EXAMINES 'FRAUEN UND FILM', WOMEN'S CINEMA AND FEMINIST FILM THEORY IN WEST GERMANY

¹ Editorial, *Frauen und Film (FuF)* 40, 1986, p. 3. Parts of the following article are based on conversations with Heide Schlüppmann. Since there is no way of giving a non-biased account of a journal that has recently undergone a break-up of its editorial board, I should add in advance that this report is informed, in more than one way, by a Frankfurt perspective. (All translations are my own.)

Frauen und Film has always tended to scrutinize the notion of cinema as a closed-circuit apparatus of patriarchal culture for its leaks and fissures, for the key holes of female scopophilia.¹

FOUNDED BY FILM-MAKER Helke Sander in 1974, *Frauen und Film* (*Women and Film*) has been called Europe's first and only feminist film journal. Beyond this somewhat dubious record (why the only one?), the journal represents an important aspect of feminist film culture in West Germany. Now into number 42, the history of *Frauen und Film* is bound up with the development of women's cinema in the early '70s as well as its subsequent transformations. As such, it documents a changing relationship between feminist criticism and film practice, specifically an increasing tendency towards specialisation and professionalisation in each area. Moreover, unlike other German periodicals devoted to film, *Frauen und Film* juxtaposes the concerns of a particular film culture – and the problems of a particular national cinema – with debates in film theory as they were carried on, for instance, in publications like *Screen*, *Camera Obscura*, *Wide Angle* or *Jump Cut* over the past decade and a half. What distinguishes the journal among its international cousins, however, is its theoretical affiliation with the Frankfurt School, its eclectic and often revisionist attempt to develop a feminist approach from that tradition.

German women's cinema emerged in a context defined, on the one hand, by the women's movement and, on the other, by the politics of *Autorenkino* (a cinema of authors) which had propelled alternative film practice in the Federal Republic since the 1960s. As in other countries, the women's movement had grown out of the student movement. Committed to New Left politics, feminists began to articulate their own causes – the politics of the personal, issues of sexuality and procreative freedom – more often than not in opposition to their male comrades, a historical moment dramatised, with an acute sense of detail and capacity for self-irony, in Helke Sander's film, *The Subjective Factor* (1980). During this first phase, film practice was part of a larger strategy to build a public sphere for feminist politics which, at the time, crystallised

around the struggle for the repeal of the abortion law (paragraph 218). Given the urgency of such concerns, it is not surprising that the majority of films made by women in the late '60s and '70s – over forty – are documentaries, with titles like *Does the Pill Liberate Us?* (*Macht die Pille frei?*, Sander and Sarah Schumann, 1973), *Women: Tail Lights of the Union?* (*Frauen – Schlusslichter der Gewerkschaft?*, Ingrid Oppermann et al, 1971) or *Von wegen 'Schicksal'* (*Apropos Fate*, Helga Reidemeister, 1979).

As film became a consciousness-raising and organising tool, questions relating to the conditions of women's film-making, of women's representation in cinema, were likewise approached in rather pragmatic terms. In 1973, international women's film festivals took place in Berlin and Munich, accompanied by more long-range initiatives in exhibition (theatres, film groups and bookstores in Berlin, Munich, Saarbrücken, Hamburg, Hannover) and distribution (most notably Chaos-Film under Hildegard Westbeld). Facing the combined competition of both commercial cinema and the established male avant-garde (New German auteurs like Fassbinder, Herzog, Wenders, Schlöndorff, Kluge and Reitz), women film-makers tried to utilise the same federal funding sources that had advanced the careers of their male colleagues. This effort involved years of lobbying, campaigning and committee work and, eventually, led to the formation of a professional organisation of women film workers in 1979. More than any other measure, finally, the law regulating TV co-productions gave women film-makers access to a wider audience – though not without production guidelines and programming structures likely to neutralise any potentially radical impact.²

For the women who founded *Frauen und Film* and worked on the journal for the first few years – Helke Sander, Gesine Strempel, Sarah Schumann, Heike Hurst – its task was clearly delineated by the pressures and demands of the day: to provide a forum for feminist film politics within the women's movement. Published four times a year and initially distributed by Brot und Rosen (Bread and Roses), a Berlin women's group, the journal contained filmographies and lists of ongoing projects, network addresses, reports on festivals and conferences (notably Edinburgh), on funding battles and lobbying crusades. Above and beyond this newsletter function, however, the journal's programme was defined by two major objectives – as stated, rather tersely, in issue number 6 (1975): (a) 'to analyse the workings of patriarchal culture in cinema' and (b) 'to recognise and name feminist perspectives in film and develop them further'.

The critique of patriarchal cinema focused less on the obvious culprit, classical Hollywood film, than on the ostensible/former political allies and the commercial fellow travellers of the women's movement. Thus, a polemical review of the East German production *The Legend of Paul and Paula* in number 2 (1974) set the tone for the topic pursued in number 4 (1975), 'Sexual Reactionaries in Leftist Cinema', and a similar attack was launched against the macho-Maoist journal *Filmfaust* (named after Dziga Vertov's 'film fist') in number 14 (1977). Another critical focus

² On the subsidy system and film funding laws and their impact on West German cinema, see Eric Rentschler, *West German Film in the Course of Time* (Bedford Hills, New York, Redgrave Publishing Company, 1984, chapter 2. Among German publications on women's cinema, see in particular the special issue of *Medien praktisch* 2, 1980. On the relationship between feminist film practice and the male avant-garde, see my earlier review of *Frauen und Film* in *Heresies* 16, 1983, pp 30-31.

was the so-called 'New Woman's Film', the wave of male-directed films featuring female protagonists and ostensibly feminist issues, from Fassbinder's *Effi Briest* and Handke's *The Left-Handed Woman* to Zinnemann's *Julia* and Mazursky's *An Unmarried Woman* (see especially number 19/1979). On the whole, however, the critique of *Männerkino* (male cinema) did not take up that much of the journal's space and attention. The only male director who appears to have received comparatively more sustained discussion is Alexander Kluge, whether because of his professed interest in 'women's topics' and a specifically 'female productive force' or for his ties with the Frankfurt School and the theoretical foundations of an alternative *Autorenkino*.

The main focus of the journal has been – and continues to be – the notion of a feminist counter tradition in cinema, linking the archaeology of women film-makers (e.g., Alice Guy-Blaché, Esther Schub, Léontine Sagan, Maya Deren) to the presentation of work by more recent film-makers like Chantal Akerman, Marguerite Duras, Lina Wertmüller, Giovanna Gagliardo, Elda Tattoli, Yvonne Rainer, Bette Gordon, Valie Export, Frederike Pezold, Elfi Mikesch, Ula Stöckl, Helma Sanders-Brahms, Ingemo Engström, Ulrike Ottinger, Jutta Brückner – to mention just a few. This counter tradition is by no means unproblematic, let alone simply composed of all women who ever worked in cinema. Thus, as could be expected of a journal with any degree of historical consciousness, *Frauen und Film* took a critical stand towards the internationally promoted 'Riefenstahl Renaissance' (number 14/1977), as on the continuing cult of Nazi star Zarah Leander (number 29/1981). But even – and especially – with regard to contemporary work, the editors have time and again rejected false pieties and insisted that films by women be subjected to as rigorous a critical standard as films directed by men. (This policy may account for – though not excuse – the excessive harshness, if not shortsightedness, of particular reviews as, for instance, in the case of Ottinger's *Ticket of No Return* [number 22/1979].)

Beyond the regular (if at times random) reviewing of individual films, however, the formation of a counter canon was also posed as a theoretical problem, linked to debates on the question of a feminine/feminist aesthetics which gained momentum during the 1970s.³ As Gertrud Koch observed, the contradiction at the core of a feminist aesthetics, especially for the cinema, was the inherent divergence between, on the one hand, a broadening of the oppositional public sphere initiated by the women's movement and, on the other, the radical subjectivity and complexity that come with artistic emancipation and differentiation. Like Silvia Bovenschen, Koch cautioned against the illusion of a counter tradition independent of the tradition of patriarchal art, not only because the latter itself has absorbed centuries of women's work, sensibility and imagination but also because it has developed modes of negativity and expression capable at once of registering the traces of gender-specific domination and distortion and of anticipating a liberated subjectivity of women and men alike. Therefore, Koch maintained, 'feminist aesthetics must not regress beyond the current state of aesthetics, whether into a

³ Especially important for these debates was the work of Silvia Bovenschen, Ulrike Prokop and Elisabeth Lenk. Two of Bovenschen's essays have appeared in translation: 'Is There a Feminine Aesthetic?', *New German Critique* (NGC) 10, 1977, 111-137; and 'The Contemporary Witch, the Historical Witch and the Witch Myth', *NGC* 15, 1978, pp 83-119. On feminist debates in literature during the 1970s, see Sigrid Weigel, '“Woman Begins Relating to Herself”: Contemporary German Women's Literature (Part One)', *NGC* 31, Winter 1984, pp 53-94.

political instrumentalism or into an archaic primitivism that would insinuate itself back into the Golden Age of matriarchal lore.⁴

Much as the relationship to the patriarchal tradition remained a key question of feminist aesthetics, the bulk of the journal's work during the 1970s could be described as an investigation of forms of authorship – a detailed documentation of the conditions under which women work and interact with cinema. Rejecting a feminist version of auteurism, *Frauen und Film* alternated issues on particular women directors with special issues on women editors (number 9/1976); on women producers (number 15/1978); on women viewers (number 17/1978); on actresses (number 26/1980) and on female cinematographers (number 27/1981). In addition, the journal has been paying special attention to women writing on film: from film critics for provincial papers (number 7) through Lotte Eisner (number 11) and Emilie Altenloh⁵ (number 14) to the painfully self-reflective – and to some extent self-serving – 'stocktaking' in number 34 (1983). What emerges from these reports on women in diverse branches of the institution is a sense of women's cinema as a context that already exists virtually, in whatever alienated, isolated and ambivalent form – a web of invisible labour that demands to be made visible, a history of visual representations that have to be appropriated through critical analysis and counter narratives.

A guiding interest in the journal's discussions of female authorship in cinema has been, from number 8 (1976) on, the possibility of collective production, of transforming the technologically founded collectivity of the apparatus into an alternative cultural practice. As it did for the women's movement at large, collectivity represented something of a utopian standard for the feminist film community, an ideal maintained against the hierarchy, competition and isolation imposed by patriarchal-capitalist modes of production. Yet the reality of collaborative projects presented a somewhat murkier picture. For one thing, as Sander pointed out, these projects often owed their existence to economic necessity and lack of professional skills rather than political choice.⁶ Besides, even male-dominated cinema offered models of collaboration from which feminists could learn, whether by critique or example. Thus, the journal conducted interviews with women film-makers working with usually better known men (Danielle Huillet, Gisela Tuchtenhagen, Margarethe von Trotta). Likewise, a caustic review of *Germany in Autumn* and an open letter attacking its male auteurs for posing as a collective while excluding film-makers of lesser reputations appeared in the same issue (number 16/1978) as an article by Sander emphasising the viability of the 'politics of production' demonstrated by that film.

The programmatic interest in collectivity, finally, characterises the discursive mode of the journal itself – its editorial process, tone and self-image – in particular during the '70s. Next to articles and reviews we find, in almost every issue, portraits, letters, interviews and discussions. And even if the contributions don't always add up to a meaningful polyphony or an ongoing debate from one issue to the next, *Frauen und Film* nonetheless conveys a sense of collective enterprise, albeit of a precar-

⁴ Gertrud Koch, 'On the Difficulties of Dealing with "Autonomy"', *FuF* 31, 1982, p. 51. A version of this essay has been translated as part of 'Exchanging the Gaze: Re-Visioning Feminist Film Theory', *NGC* 34, Winter 1985 pp. 151ff.

⁵ Emilie Altenloh wrote what must be the first social science dissertation on the cinema, *Zur Soziologie des Kino*, Jena, Diederichs, 1914, an analysis of the composition, behaviour and expectations of motion picture audiences along the lines of gender, class and age.

⁶ Helke Sander, 'I Like Chaos but I Don't Know Whether Chaos Likes Me', *FuF* 15, 1977, 8; trans. as 'Feminism and Film', *Jump Cut* 27, 1982. Also see Sander's satire involving a collaborative project – and the dubious conditions for its funding – in her 1978 film *The All-Round Reduced Personality – REDUPERS*.

ious, fragmentary and eclectic quality. This balance between individual and collective authorship, between the damaged fragments of female subjectivity and the vision of a counter tradition, becomes emblematic in many of the journal's extraordinary covers – assemblages, collages, photo-montages – designed by such artists as Sarah Schumann, filmmaker Elfi Mikesch (Oh Muvie Photographs) and photographer Silke Grossmann.

Towards the end of the decade, however, as the journal's ties with the women's movement began to loosen (and the women's movement itself was losing its militant focus after the revision of the abortion law in 1976), an increasing tendency towards specialisation and professionalisation set in, involving changes in editorial personnel and style. When Sander withdrew from the editorial board to concentrate on her film projects, the journal became more and more the domain of critics (like Claudia Lenssen and Gertrud Koch) as well as historians (like Uta Berg-Ganschow, Heide Schlüpmann and Karola Gramann), although a number of film-makers, in particular Jutta Brückner, continued to contribute important critical and theoretical work. This advancing division of labour was accompanied by a certain regional decentralisation: thus, between 1981 and 1983, editorial offices were listed under addresses in Berlin, Frankfurt, Cologne and Paris.

During the transitional period that followed, the journal served as a platform for a variety of interests, positions and voices, while tensions among editorial groups remained largely submerged. Two basic directions can be discerned, corresponding to a polarisation between Frankfurt and Berlin. Issues of *Frauen und Film* coming out of Berlin seemed to converge, increasingly, with a general current in German film criticism at the time (promoted largely by the now defunct journal *Filme*) which saw the critic's task in merely describing films according to personal sensibility and which, at its worst, tended to celebrate the sheer image on the screen as an inspiration for ostensibly poetic prose. The Frankfurt group, true to local tradition, displayed a greater interest in theory (as well as in a theoretically motivated historiography) and, above all, insisted upon the responsibility of the feminist critic to trace patterns of ideology even in her own fascination. Ironically, the proponents of the former direction understood their writing practice as a continuation of the journal's earlier interest in the idea of *Laienkritik* (non-professional criticism), cultivating it as an anti-intellectual style while pursuing their own careers as professional critics. Instead of facing up to this contradiction, the Berlin editors – in the above-mentioned issue devoted to 'Writing on Film' (number 34/1983) – declared that the journal, with its feminist goals and practices, had outlived its function; without consulting the other editorial groups, they terminated the publication contract with Rotbuch Verlag. The Frankfurt group, however, disagreed and made every effort to keep the journal going.

With number 35 (1983), *Frauen und Film* began to be published by Stroemfeld/Roter Stern in Frankfurt (publisher of a new Hölderlin edition, as of the collected works of Georg Groddeck and Klaus Theweleit)

– under the joint editorship of Karola Gramann, Gertrud Koch and Heide Schlüpmann. The journal now appears only twice a year, but individual issues are twice as long as before; the average printing is two thousand copies (which by German standards is high). The editors acknowledge the advanced division of labour within feminist film culture, but rather than trying to resurrect a false unity of theory and practice, they assert the legitimacy and political necessity of critical discourse and set out to meet the challenge of differentiation on their own ground.

With greater emphasis on both theory and history, the new *Frauen und Film* resumed thematic concerns of the earlier phase – such as questions of sexuality with a special issue on ‘Masochism’ (number 39/1985) which complements previous issues on ‘Erotic Projection’ (number 33/1982), ‘The Pornographic Gaze’ (number 30/1981) and on female homosexuality, entitled ‘Mourning Becomes Sappho?’ (number 28) 1981); an issue on avant-garde and experimental film-making (number 37/1984, guest-edited by Noll Brinckmann) continues the work on questions of film aesthetics. Unlike before, and in addition to a frequent column entitled ‘Archive’, whole issues are now devoted to periods of film history: number 35 (1983) on the 1950s, the decade of *Film und Frau* (a woman’s magazine whose title *Frauen und Film* polemically inverts), and number 41 (1987) on early cinema – ‘Rock, Rock, My Baby: Out of the Cradles of Film History’.

More extensively than before, the journal is opening its pages to English and North American film theory, in particular psychoanalytically-oriented approaches to representation and reception. Not that these approaches were hitherto ignored – earlier issues of *Frauen und Film* included translations of articles by Claire Johnston, Claire Pajakowska and others, conference reports, book and journal reviews and numerous references to Laura Mulvey. But the impact of this type of film theory had remained minimal, and reservations against it were rarely substantiated. Since the editorial shift, however, the journal seems to be seeking a more systematic confrontation of, loosely speaking, poststructuralist approaches in feminist film theory with the tradition closer to the editors’ own background – Critical Theory (a term coined by Horkheimer), the tradition of the Frankfurt School. This confrontation throws into relief particular discontents with the former type of film theory (which have to some extent been voiced in English and North American debates as well⁷) – such as its reliance upon ahistorical paradigms of semiology and psychoanalysis, its inability to conceptualise social and cultural specificity, and its facile surrender of the aesthetic dimension.

But let us not create the impression that *Frauen und Film* is staging yet another contest between French and German paradigms. Rather, the journal’s mode of discourse highlights differences in the very concept of theory, in the critic’s relationship to theoretical paradigms. I hesitate to call the Frankfurt School a paradigm (in the sense that Lacanian/Althusserian concepts of subjectivity, language and ideology have constituted a paradigm for French, English and American film theory during the ’70s), although particular texts undoubtedly provide something of a

⁷ Most notably by Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn’t*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1984. Also see Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp and Linda Williams (eds), *Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*, Frederick MD, University Publications of America, 1984.

paradigmatic frame of reference – Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947), Kracauer's essays of the 1920s, Benjamin's work on film and commodity culture, Adorno's later essays on film and television, or Negt and Kluge's *Public Sphere and Experience* (1972). It seems more appropriate to speak of a critical tradition, defined by certain shared assumptions and cognitive interests (above all, a critical theory of society, an analysis of forms of domination); by specific issues around which debates have crystallised (such as the juncture of modernism and mass culture); and by particular concepts (such as 'distraction', 'experience', or 'mimesis') – a set of coordinates along which the critic tends to navigate. Perhaps the most characteristic gesture of Critical Theory is the movement between a variant of Marxist *Ideologiekritik* (critique of ideology) and a search for utopian moments, even in ideologically compromised or complicit contexts. Between these two coordinates, however, a diversity of types of inquiry and speculation – whether sociological, philosophical, psychoanalytic, historical or aesthetic – as well as a relative promiscuity of sources, styles and subject matter were able to unfold.

In this tradition then, *Frauen und Film*'s attitude towards psychoanalytically-oriented feminist film theory appears as principled as it may seem opportunistic. The thematic focus of several recent issues clearly reflects the influence of English and North American debates: the concept and practice of 'Masquerade' (number 38/1985); men as objects of visual pleasure, '*Männer, die ins Auge gehen*' ('Men Who Hit the Eye', number 40/1986); and, most explicitly, 'Psychoanalysis' (number 36/1984). Yet a look at the contents pages will quickly dispel any expectation that these issues are merely compensating for the international theory lag. Thus, the issue on masquerade includes, in addition to translations of articles by Mary Ann Doane and Maureen Turim, a practicing analyst's discussion of Kim Novak's French twist and the costumes of a fantasmatic femininity in Hitchcock's *Vertigo*; Heide Schlüpmann's comparison of the imbrication of politics, fashion and femininity in historical costume films of the '30s and '50s; and reflections on nudity as a social costume by Jutta Brückner. The issue on men juxtaposes Richard Dyer's *Screen* article on the male pin-up with speculations on Gary Cooper (Noll Brinckmann) and Clark Gable (Mechthild Zeul), with Karsten Witte's homage to Montgomery Clift and Schlüpmann's remarkable essay on Burt Lancaster, 'Chapped Skin: On the Erotics of Decay in Luchino Visconti's *The Leopard*'. The issue on psychoanalysis, finally, contains translations of work by Anne Friedberg and E Ann Kaplan, a number of psychoanalytic readings of particular films, a discussion between Gertrud Koch and two analysts on female patients' fascination with Saura's *Carmen* and an archival section documenting the historical intersection of cinema and psychoanalysis with texts by Hanns Sachs, Lou Andreas-Salomé, Margrit Freud and others; the issue opens with an article by Koch on concepts of psychoanalysis in Critical Theory in the light of which, for instance, the concept of spectatorship

in the Culture Industry chapter of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is rejected as behaviouristic and reductive.⁸

As these examples suggest, the paradigmatic claim of psychoanalysis is relativised by a multiplicity of perspectives, ranging from anthropological speculation through the history of theory to a cultural phenomenology of sexual difference. Conversely, the role of sexuality in cinematic representation and fascination is not reduced to the Procrustean bed of psychoanalytic categories but is explored in terms of the cultural organisation of erotic fantasy – in a variety of guises and implications (see numbers 33, 28, 30, 39). Here *Frauen und Film* clearly – though by no means uncritically – follows in the footsteps of Adorno, Benjamin and Marcuse who, *pace* Foucault, saw in the radical pursuit of eros a negation of, if not a source of resistance against, social forms of identity and subjecthood.

What seems to be the most salient distinction between *Frauen und Film* and the predominant direction in English and North American feminist film theory, at least until recently, is its critical focus or emphasis – what Habermas called ‘cognitive interest’. While the journal’s editors and most of its contributors tend to endorse the psychoanalytic/semiological analysis of the apparatus as fundamentally patriarchal, they appear as much interested in refining that analysis as in tracing counter currents which point towards an alternative organisation of cinema. In other words, while fully aware of the complicity of cinematic pleasure, they find it more important to record aspects of female subjectivity already invested in the cinema, albeit marginalised and overdetermined, and to reflect upon these in their ambivalence. The feminist critic’s task, according to Schlüppmann, is to put the fragmented and suppressed history of female desire onto its feet, or, rather, ‘from the male genital onto the female head’:

*Feminist film theory has furnished a basic analysis of how the patriarchal organisation of society perpetuates itself in cinema, how the male gaze and male fantasies structure the textual organization of a film, in particular constellations of gender. What remains unclear, however, is whatever drew women – early on and in great numbers – to the motion picture shows. The wish to radicalise Mulvey’s theory remains as yet unfulfilled: not to temper the analysis in its aggressivity – the erotic mirage may indeed dissolve into the void of patriarchal domination – but nonetheless to acknowledge female desire as experienced in the cinema. If that desire is illusion, it needs to be preserved on the level of reflection, rather than be banished into asceticism.*⁹

The approach envisioned by Schlüppmann may be closer to Benjamin’s mode of ‘redemptive criticism’ than to the critique of ideology approach that predominates much of Adorno’s writings on film and mass culture.¹⁰ What both have in common, however, and what characterises the journal’s overall affiliation with Critical Theory, is a double focus on totality and material detail, mediating (to varying degrees) the analysis of the system with the recognition of individual experience.

⁸ Gertrud Koch, ‘Psychoanalysis of the Pre-Verbal: - Anthropological Concepts of Psychoanalysis in Critical Theory’, *FuF* 36, 1984, pp 5-9; translated as part of her ‘Exchanging the Gaze’, *op cit*, pp 145ff.

⁹ Heide Schlüppmann, ‘Chapped Skin’, *FuF* 40, 1986, 30. Also see Gertrud Koch, ‘Why Women Go to the Movies’ (1980), *Jump Cut* 27, 1982.

¹⁰ Jürgen Habermas, ‘Consciousness-Raising or Redemptive Criticism: The Contemporaneity of Walter Benjamin’, 1972, *NGC* 17, Spring 1979, pp 30-59; Habermas actually contrasts Benjamin’s approach with that of the early Marcuse.

¹¹ Miriam Hansen, 'Benjamin, Cinema and Experience: "The Blue Flower in the Land of Technology"', *NGC* 40, Winter 1987, pp 179-224.

¹² Tania Modleski elaborates on this point in 'Rape vs. Manslaughter: Hitchcock's *Blackmail* and Feminist Interpretation', *PMLA* 102.3, May 1987, pp 304-315.

¹³ *FuF* 38, 1985, pp 96-109; excerpts translated in 'Dossier on *Heimat*', *NGC* 36, 1985. It should be stressed here that *Heimat* not only was an enormously popular success, in tune with Birburg and the ongoing 'normalisation' of German history, but the TV series also received overwhelmingly positive reviews – even from critics on the left; to this day, the discussion in *Frauen und Film* remains the only dissenting analysis to appear in German.

The term experience (*Erfahrung*) here implies a particular concept of experience, largely derived from Benjamin, which not only is contingent upon social and historical change but crucially includes dimensions of intersubjectivity and memory.¹¹ Unlike psychoanalytic theories of the apparatus which, derived from Lacan, are relying upon a basically spatial model, *Frauen und Film* tends to conceptualise the cinematic institution more often in temporal terms, whether by reconstructing a virtual historical collective of women making and viewing films or by registering biographical layers of experience mobilised in the viewing process or by imagining different forms of women's representation and participation in the public sphere.

The emphasis on experience – in this specific sense – can be felt most strongly in the critic's own voice, the passionate involvement that propels the most philosophical argument. In the best passages of *Frauen und Film*, one gets the sense that feminist criticism differs most specifically from other types of criticism, both academic and journalistic, in precisely the imbrication of systematic with experiential analysis, and that the personal, even the autobiographical, need not be merely private as long as it reflects upon its own historicity and social contingency. The experiential gravity of feminist criticism, moreover, is not only a matter of substance but also of diction – a mode of writing that combines literary style with colloquial, idiomatic and idiosyncratic expression, a mode of theorising that prefers metaphor, paradox, hyperbole and irony to the pure good of classification. This may be one reason why reading articles in *Frauen und Film* often turns out to be a less predictable enterprise than reading US academic prose, however worthy its political intent.

The journal's commitment to a critical concept of experience may also elucidate the hermeneutic dilemma faced – or, for the most part, ignored – by English and North American feminist critics, specifically concerning the question of female spectatorship. If classical cinema defines the place of the female spectator as an impossibility, suspending identification between transvestite pleasure and masochistic objectification, what then gives the feminist critic access to an analysis of these patterns? Rather than straddling the dichotomy of complicit pleasure or critical distance, the discursive practice of *Frauen und Film* testifies to a third possibility: that is, to acknowledge the critic's spectatorial experience in all its complexity and ambivalence, including the intellectual pleasure of seeing – and writing about – patriarchal structures spelled out with hyperbolic or parodic clarity.¹²

Even when the critique of ideology clearly takes precedence over redemptive criticism, as in the case of *Frauen und Film*'s polemics against Edgar Reitz's *Heimat*, the experiential investment makes this critique more than an exercise in discourse analysis.¹³ The history, after all, which *Heimat* purports to chronicle is part of the feminist critic's own socialisation and political legacy – part of a specific cultural inscription of sexual and ethnic difference which still troubles the West German social imaginary and prolongs its shadows into prevailing political

and economic reality. *Frauen und Film*, we should be aware, is being published without academic or institutional affiliation. Not only are there very few academic jobs for women, despite sporadic affirmative action measures to the contrary (the ostensible obstacle being the stagnation of German universities in general); but also, whether in reaction to the Nazi's love affair with cinema or as an effect of anti-American concepts of culture, cinema studies have remained a step-child in the West German academy. And as for the once prodigious New German film culture, the historical turn (*Wende*) that inaugurated the age of Reagan, Thatcher and Kohl has brought about changes in media politics and subsidy laws that threaten the margin of alternative cinema. The most celebrated women's film of 1986, after all, was Doris Doerries' comedy of yuppie conformity, *Men*. It is to be applauded, therefore, that *Frauen und Film*, having left the paternal house of Critical Theory (to modify a quote used in an editorial), continues its excursions on the 'road of reason' – even if they may yield, for the time being, only messages in a bottle.

A year's subscription (two issues) to *Frauen und Film* including postage costs DM 30 from Stroemfeld Buchversand, Holzhausenstrasse 4, D-6000, Frankfurt am Main, W. Germany.

NOTICE OF THE SEFT ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

The Annual General Meeting of the Society for Education in Film and Television will take place in London on Saturday, December 5, 1987. In addition to SEFT business, there will be workshop discussions on media education, theory and policy.

Nominations are invited for the post of Treasurer and for 9 members of the Executive Committee. Names of nominees (together with a brief statement and the names of 1 proposer and 1 seconder) should be received at the SEFT office, 29 Old Compton Street, London W1V 5PL, by October 10, 1987. Nominees, proposers and seconders must all be members of the Society for Education in Film and Television. Membership is either through subscription to *Screen* or *Initiatives*. All motions to be put before the AGM should also be received at the SEFT office by October 10, 1987.

IMPOSSIBLE PROJECTIONS

BERENICE REYNAUD ON
'THE MAN WHO ENVIED WOMEN'

¹ See in particular the chapter 'Dieu et la Jouissance de la Femme', in Jacques Lacan, *Encore*, Editions du Seuil, Paris, 1975, pp 61-71. (For an English translation of part of this essay, see Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose (eds), *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the école Freudienne*, London, Macmillan, 1982, pp 137-148. All translations in this article are by David Jacobson and Bérénice Reynaud.)

² Here I must acknowledge my theoretical debt to French art historian Vanina Costa, who pointed out to me the 'pictorial' aspect of the cinematic space in Yvonne Rainer's movies, when I introduced a retrospective of her films at the Festival d'Automne in Paris in December 1984.

YVONNE RAINER'S 1980 FILM, *Journeys from Berlin*, revolved around scenes of psychoanalytic sessions which, quite elegantly, demonstrated the impossibility of cinematically *representing* the psychoanalytical act (an important element in our civilisation's sexual apparatus, as Foucault has shown in his *History of Sexuality*). A middle-aged blonde woman, imposing, with an impeccable, rather theatrical delivery (cinema scholar Annette Michelson), is seated at a table, facing the camera, and addressing a character visible only from the back: the analyst. An oblique line extends to the patient's eyes from the analyst's hidden face (such that it becomes, more or less, one of the faces of God, 'God's hidden face upheld by feminine *jouissance*', as mentioned by Lacan¹), and continues behind the patient's body to reach, in classic Renaissance perspective², a 'vanishing point' that defines a space behind her, a 'vanishing space'. And in this space, which appears as separated from that of the analytic session as if it were a back projection – like the landscapes running behind the car windows in Hollywood classics³ – various actions take place: a carpet is unrolled, a bucket is filled with water, etc, as in Rainer's choreographies for the Judson Church Theater in the '60s, in which she made casually dressed people do very simple and mundane things on stage. Also, as if to balance this special brand of 'incongruous realism', the artificial quality of the background in *Journeys from Berlin* is enhanced by the intrusion of quasi-surrealistic events: the back wall vanishes, and the street traffic becomes visible.

None of this has, of course, anything to do with the words uttered during the session, with the nature of the exchange between patient and analyst. It establishes a visual counterpoint to the *real* vanishing point of the image constituted by the *figure* of the analyst (in the double meaning

this word has in French: face, and configuration of elements within an ensemble). Rainer emphasises this point by assigning the part of the 'supposed subject of knowing'⁴ (the analyst) to three different people (who, and this is no coincidence, represent the three figures of the Oedipal triad: a man, a woman and a young boy⁵). Thus, the analytical situation is represented by Rainer in the form of an ellipse, with two vanishing points: one in the patient's 'background' (in all senses of the term), and the other in the analyst's 'field', continuing in the imaginary space off-screen.

The Man Who Envied Women radically changes this perspective, flattening the cinematic space even further. The two imaginary, quasi-anamorphic⁶ protrusions are eliminated: the analyst disappears, swallowed by the off-screen space (which means that he/she ends up literally on the spectator's lap⁷, unless it is the spectator who has become the analyst – i.e., the idiot who does not know anything but whose ignorance assumes all possible knowledges). On the other hand, the space of the subject's 'background' is replaced by a film screen, the flat surface par excellence onto which are projected excerpts of *noir* movies (*Clash by Night*, *Dangerous*, *Dead Reckoning*, *Gilda*, *In a Lonely Place*), classic melodramas (*Caught*, *Dark Victory*), and various 'independent' or 'art' movies (*Un Chien Andalou*, *Night of the Living Dead*, Hollis Frampton's *Otherwise Unexplained Fires* and Babette Mangolte and Trisha Brown's *Watermotor*). Squeezed between these two non-existent spaces, and always seated in front of the camera, a man is speaking. Delivering the opening line of the film, he says: 'Doctor, I'll tell you all you want to know about my sex life.' *To whom* does he speak? And *about whom*? Those are the two vanishing points, no longer governed by the rules of classical perspective, to be found within his discourse.



Backgrounds: Jack Deller (William Raymond) in front of *In a Lonely Place*.

³ In fact, to achieve this effect, Rainer simply changed the camera angle.

⁴ I prefer the translation 'supposed subject of knowing' – coined by Stuart Schneiderman in his *Returning to Freud – Clinical Psychoanalysis and the School of Lacan*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1980, p vii – to the 'subject supposed to know' used by Alan Sheridan. As Schneiderman puts it, what is supposed is the subject, not the knowledge.

⁵ A young boy and not a little girl, even though the patient is a woman. The Oedipus complex is a structure organised around a subject marked as 'masculine', and this is why it is more difficult for women to find their place in it.

⁶ 'Anamorphosis': 'a figure enlarged and distorted according to the lines of what may be called a perspective' (Lacan); for example the skull in Holbein's painting 'The Ambassadors', which, seen from a certain angle, is merely a set of flat lines, and, from another, 'bursts out in space' to reconstitute itself in three dimensions. See Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, translated by Alan Sheridan, New York, Norton, 1978, pp 85-89.

⁷ Since first writing this piece in French in January 1986, I have changed my mind about this specific point. First, art historian Elizabeth Lebovici suggested at the 1986 Women's International Film Festival in Créteil that in the scene when the camera moves away from Jack Deller to enter another space (that of a movie theatre where *The Night of the Living Dead* is projected), the position of Deller's invisible analyst does not coincide entirely with that of the spectator. Deller's gaze defines an oblique line in the off-screen space, and his analyst is slightly to the side of the spectator. Secondly, in Jean-Pierre Oudart's seminal 'Cinema and Suture', *Screen* Winter 1977/78, vol 18 no 4, pp 35-47, he explains that the spectator is not a substitute for the Absent One constructed by the subject's imaginary in the missing field. In other words, Jack Deller's analyst does not occupy the spectator's seat, is not exactly seated on his lap, but is probably at an angle to him.

⁸ About the similarity of this situation to that of prostitution (the patient as 'client') see Daniel Schmidt's film *L'Ombre des Anges* (the prostitute is paid to listen). See also the final sequence of Mike Nichols's *Carnal Knowledge*.

⁹ Serge Daney, 'L'orgue et l'aspirateur', in *Cahiers du Cinéma*, no 278-79, August-September 1977. An excerpt of this article has been reprinted in

His discourse, however, is not the only one to be developed in the film. Rainer, who had already subverted the classic form of the frontal interview by making the interviewer a silent and sexually indeterminate psychoanalyst, adds another 'cliché': the voice 'off' of an invisible character, that of dancer/choreographer Trisha Brown, a friend and colleague of hers since the days of the Judson Church Theater.

It is the alternation of these two voices that will weave the first network of oppositions behind *The Man Who Envied Women*. From the outset, they fail to mesh. The man's 'I'll tell you all . . .' is followed by the woman's first line: 'It was a hard week. I split up with my husband and moved into my studio.' When he talks, the man occupies the foreground. His speech is confident, slightly complacent. What is more, he is in a position where he is paying to be able to speak, to be listened to with the proverbially benign professional neutrality, to have the right to say it 'all' about his sex life.⁸ What he says, with a touching monotony (the text of his monologue is a compilation of the rather obsessive letters written by Raymond Chandler in his last years), is that he knows 'nearly too much' about women. This 'nearly too much' has to come out, be emitted. Visibly. From his very lips. It is what, in an article published in 1977 in *Cahiers du Cinéma*, Serge Daney calls, the *voice out* (as opposed to the *voice off* – for example, a commentary superimposed over the images – and the *voice in* – a voice coming from off-screen but impinging on the image, the interviewer's voice, for example).

*The voice out is an emission, a spurt, refuse: one of these objects the body expels (along with the gaze, blood, vomit, semen, etc. . .). [It] partakes of pornography in that it allows the moment of emission to be fetishised. Porn cinema is likewise entirely centred on the spectacle of the orgasm seen on the male, that is to say on the most visible, end of things (coitus interruptus, ejaculation).*⁹

Rainer both stresses and subverts the self-satisfied position of the male ejaculating words. She does so by naming her hero Jack Deller. Deller for 'tell her'. The male's discourse is always addressed, ultimately, to women, to a woman, even though, to be able to utter this discourse, he often needs to intimidate, eliminate, reduce her to silence, slavery, submission, to make her disappear from the screen. And why 'Jack'? someone asks in the movie. First, because Jack has a 'male' sound; it resounds as cock, dick, prick and pecker: and also because of 'good Anglo-Saxon rhymes', such as 'The House that Jack Built'.

The film-maker, however, subverts this position by cutting the speaker short (or up) from time to time, by leaving the image without sound or the sound without image, by dividing the character of Jack between two actors¹⁰ (William Raymond, of the experimental theatre troupe Mabou Mines, and Larry Loonin), and, during the mix, by processing and distorting the hero's voice when he lectures to his students on literary and psychoanalytic theory. (His discourse, pointedly pedantic, is a collage of utterances made by New York academics.) This



Doubles: Larry Loonin as Jack Deller.

sequence, which some spectators wrongly take in a literal sense, is in fact a profound reflexion on the violence certain forms of seduction exert, and the 'stupidity of the signifier', of which more below.

So much for the man. The woman is not seen, or rather is seen only in the guise of shadows, duplications, images, simulacra, traces. *Her* voice is never synchronic – never *out* –, never confident. It is rather discreet, confused, sometimes enraged. She comments, asks questions, doubts. Her position is exactly the reverse of Deller's. In Daney's terms, her voice is *off*, defining an 'imaginary space'; with the man's *voice out*, on the contrary, 'the flat image gives an illusion of depth . . . [and] what we have is an illusory space, the space of the lure'.¹¹ We have returned here to the figure of anamorphosis, which Lacan views as a metaphor for erection¹²: when a man speaks on screen, it is to assert his manly potency. But what does a woman assert when she speaks?

Rainer laid the premises for *The Man Who Envied Women* not only by reading the feminist theories of the last ten years about the way the cinematic gaze 'exploits and controls women's bodies'¹³, but also by reflecting upon *Comment Ça Va* (1976) by Jean-Luc Godard and Anne-Marie Miéville (a film whose main conflict is represented by the discussion between a 'traditional' trade union militant, shot from the front, and a woman working in the same factory, shot from the back, who forces him to re-examine some of his positions): 'The heroine's face is kept in the shadows. She is the "teacher", and she has the power. *She has the power because she does not appear*'.¹⁴ According to Michel Chion's splendid book, *La Voix au Cinéma*¹⁵, it is possible to say that the absence of Trisha Brown's body makes her voice an 'acousticometer' (*acoustimetre* in French), that is to say, the voice of someone who is not seen:

... even the most harmless of acousticomatic voices, once it has impinged on

the appendix of Michel Chion, *La Voix au Cinéma*, Paris, Editions de l'Etoile, 1982.

¹⁰ Yvonne Rainer has consistently relied on the device of dividing one character among several performers.

¹¹ Serge Daney, *op cit*.

¹² Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, *op cit*.

¹³ Bérénice Reynaud, 'Interview with Yvonne Rainer', in *Cahiers du Cinéma*, no 369, March 1985, pp 43-45.

¹⁴ *ibid*.

¹⁵ Michel Chion, *op cit*.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p 28.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p 27.

¹⁸ 'The very night he . . . got such an enormous erection as I had never seen the likes of. It scared me half to death. What in God's name had turned him on like that? *It could not have been me*' (italics mine). Large excerpts of the script of *Journeys from Berlin* were published in *October* no 9, Summer 1979, pp 80-106.

¹⁹ Men, who spend a great deal of time comparing (literally or metaphorically) their sex organs, nonetheless fancy that they can *lure* women and keep them in the dark about the identity of their penises. See, for example, the myth of Amphitryon, wherein Jupiter takes on the features of the king to discreetly make love (and a baby) with the latter's (faithful) wife. And for a masochistic variation, see Edmond Rostand's play *Cyrano de Bergerac*.

²⁰ Michel Chion, *op cit.*, p 25.

²¹ Dorothy Dinnerstein, *The Mermaid and the Minotaur*, New York, Harper and Row, 1977, p 161.

the image, is invested with magical powers, mostly maleficent, rarely tutelary. [A typical case is that of the invisible Dr. Mabuse.] Its impingement upon the image means that it does not speak solely as an observer, but that its relation to the image is one of a possible inclusion, of power and possession capable of functioning in both ways.¹⁶

This is exactly the case of Trisha, whose image, as we'll see, is constantly at the edge of the screen, always on the verge of entering it.

Chion connects the acousticometer to 'the apparatus of the Freudian cure, where the analysand does not see his analyst who does not look at him.'¹⁷ That is to say that one has two stylised representations of the psychoanalytic act in *The Man Who Envied Women*: a male version, that provides a visual equivalent; and a female version, that provides an aural equivalent, wherein a space of lure is opposed to an imaginary space – in psychoanalytic terms, the lure is a component of male sexuality. This is an issue tackled by Rainer in one of the 'erotic' confessions made by the analysand in *Journeys from Berlin*¹⁸: erection may 'lure' the woman who believes it is addressed to her while it is addressed to what causes desire, the *objet petit a*, which in her is not her, but rather the lost object that the man hallucinates while looking at her.¹⁹ The imaginary, on the other hand, at its formation during the mirror stage, is defined in relation to the mother's body.

Chion traces the genesis of the acousticometer, and the mythology it brings about, to the most primitive of all situations: that of the foetus, whose sense of hearing is the first to develop, who is literally immersed in the sound of its mother's voice. He traces it also in the situation of the baby whose mother 'incessantly plays hide-and-seek in his field of vision. . . . But the olfactory and vocal continuum, and possibly the tactile contact as well, maintain the presence of the mother when she is no longer seen. . . . These appearances/disappearances, dramatic as they are for the child, are somehow transposed, or reduced, by some of the ways cinema plays with the off-screen (hiding a character by keeping him perceptible through the sound).'²⁰ The power Rainer alludes to, investing the invisible woman, is thus that of the mother, whose voice engulfs, scolds and consoles the helpless child. If men have for ever tried to dominate women, to control them, to 'keep them in their place', and even, eventually, to demean and humiliate them, if, in contrast, they assign themselves the 'mission to rule the world', it is, according to Dorothy Dinnerstein's book, to which Rainer refers, because 'All of us, female as well as male, fear the will of woman. Man's dominion over what we think of as the world rests on a terror that we all feel: the terror of sinking back wholly into the helplessness of infancy.'²¹ At some point, Trisha notices: 'The trauma for the infant having to give up that first sense of harmony is much greater for the male than for the female and results in both the mother-whore syndrome and the H-bomb. Men spend their lives alternating between punishing and seeking mothering from women and carrying their rage and terror out of the family realm and into public.' This analysis enables Rainer not only to develop a

vision of 'sexual impasse', but also to connect it to political concerns: men's hunger for control is exerted not only over women, but also in the realm of economic competition, in real estate speculation, in war, against peasants in Latin America. . . .

The acoustimeter, however, is omniscient and omnipotent only in the eyes of those who are afraid of it (woman's power as a reproduction of the Primitive Mother is a masculine fantasy enabling men to justify their desire for power, and not a reality). In fact, especially when it translates female voices, non-authoritative voices, voices searching for their own voices (as in Marguerite Duras's films), the acoustimeter is a voice 'roaming the surface, *both within and without*, in search of a resting place'.²² It is exactly the position of Trisha in the film. First, as a woman, she does not really have a resting place in a capitalistic and patrilocal society; in addition, the day her husband's chronic infidelity makes her decide to leave his bourgeois loft, she receives an eviction notice for her own studio. As an artist, she is a victim of New York's unbridled real estate speculation. When she then registers in a programme called Housing for Artists, designed to allow people in her situation to be allotted a space to restore in a run-down building, she realises that such a programme *de facto* contributes to gentrification and expulsion of the ethnic minorities in the Lower East Side. In conflict over her need for space and her political consciousness, she is, literally, 'between a rock and a hard place'.

Trisha's presence and her voice, nonetheless, are scattered throughout the entire movie. We get a glimpse at her body once, at the moment when she leaves Jack. (Or do we? What we see is the body of a young woman, from the back, which the editing matches up with Trisha Brown's voice, as if body were producing voice.) On the other hand, when Trisha's real body does become visible, it is lost among a gallery of portraits including Barbara Bel Geddes, Bette Davis, Gloria Grahame, Rita Hayworth, Elizabeth Scott, Barbara Stanwyck – all the heroines of these *films noirs* being played in Jack Deller's fantasy theatre, fictions projected behind his back that demonstrate how, in our cultural past, 'real men' knew how to handle women. In the midst of these images, light, aerial, incongruous, the figure of Trisha Brown in her beautiful solo, *Watermotor*, appears, as shot by Babette Mangolte. At the same moment, Jack, without seeing her (the apparatus has been designed to produce this effect), talks about his marriage with her and his compulsive philandering.

Besides these two occurrences, Trisha's missing presence pervades the entire movie. It constitutes the 'holes' in Deller's (often ridiculous) discourse. It appears in the form of traces left by the woman on the walls of her husband's loft, her 'art', pinned to the wall, consisting of a collage of clippings from the *New York Times Magazine*, *Mother Jones* and pharmaceutical journals: a cigar ad showing a businessman celebrating his first million; corpses beheaded by the Death Squads in El Salvador; an excerpt of an article on the 'new male sensitivity'; publicity for a new hormone medicine designed to treat menopausal problems. These ima-

²² Michel Chion, *op cit*, p 28.

²³ *ibid*, p 52. Here Chion is alluding more specifically to a movie by Claude Lelouch, *Les Uns et les autres*, where this strategy is also used.

ges, these texts, are submitted to New York intellectuals who are then asked to respond to them. Their commentaries, except for that of video artist Martha Rosler which is presented in its original form, have been transcribed and re-created in the film by the voices of Trisha Brown, William Raymond and Yvonne Rainer. Brown's and Raymond's voices play yet another part in the movie. They function as one of the signifiers (as the quasi-unique signifier in Trisha's case) through which the two main fictional characters are constituted. And there is no overlapping between the disembodied voices, uttering these commentaries on the image and the fictional characters (Jack, Trisha), 'embodied' by the same voices at other moments of the films. Here we have an instance of what Chion calls 'a voice depossessed of a place, a position, to be used as "all-purpose acousticometer", . . . a fine symptom for the blurred positions of some in relation to others.'²³

There is a third voice in these commentaries, because there is a third presence, which doubles that of Trisha Brown (just as Larry Loonin's presence doubles that of William Raymond): the presence of the film-maker. Yvonne Rainer appears towards the middle of the film, in an incongruous shot that occurs as one of many breaks within the narrative structure of the film. This happens in Deller's loft, when he is just coming back from the university: he empties his briefcase, listens to his answering machine, flips through *Playboy*, etc. . . . Suddenly Yvonne Rainer enters the field, bends her head sideways in front of the camera, takes off her glasses, says: 'Will all menstruating women please leave the theater?' and leaves. This sentence is echoed by Trisha's remarks immediately after, that men, with their castration complex, are both fascinated and repelled by women's periods, and that, in our culture, causes post-menopausal women to be denied sexual powers.

Just before this 'apparition', Rainer's voice has been heard on Deller's answering machine, playing the part of the 'other woman', or, rather, of one of the other women, leaving the hero with an erotically ambiguous message.

These multiple aspects are synthesised in the dream sequence, again commented upon by the film-maker's voice – which constitutes yet another break, since this sequence, narrated in the first person, is supposed to represent Trisha's dream. The image of Yvonne Rainer's body represents alternately the character of Trisha (when wearing a rough paper mask hiding her features) and that of Trisha's mother (without the mask), who finds herself in a situation of sexual rivalry with her own daughter. Being married to Jack, she discovers him in bed with Trisha, but claims that she 'does not mind one bit', for she and Jack 'stopped having sex ten years ago'.

Finally, Trisha's presence is multiplied on another level, that of Jack's desire. In the movie, as discussed earlier, she is an acousticometer, that is to say, a vocal presence engulfing the listener, and whose source is invisible. And Jack will endeavour to look everywhere for the body emitting the voice he is fascinated by – for it reproduces for him the primordial voice of the Mother. Here is the origin of his philandering (the



Commentaries: Yvonne Rainer enters the field.

famous aria celebrating *Don Giovanni*'s 'mille tre' sexual conquests, brilliantly expounded by Lacan in his 1973 seminar *Encore*). Here is the promised 'envy' of the film's title. Here is also the explanation of the hero's strange 'perversion' (an inversion of the Peeping Tom syndrome, in which ears replace eyes). Hidden behind the head-set of a walkman, walking in the streets or sitting in coffee-shops, Jack overhears, eavesdrops on women talking among themselves. And what do they talk about? Sometimes with humour, sometimes with rage, brilliance, naiveté, revolt, or stupidity, they comment on the difficulties of their relationships with men.

The purpose of *The Man Who Envied Women*, in this respect, is to set up an *apparatus* to translate the sexual impasse into cinematic terms. Male and female discourses do not overlap, do not communicate. They reveal the loneliness of beings trapped in their respective sexual identities, structurally incapable of crossing the gap that divides one sex from the other. *He* talks to an invisible psychoanalyst, while *she* talks without being seen. When he talks to her and/or when he talks about her (which amounts to the same thing), he does not see her: he covets a multitude of female objects, of representations of the female sex, shreds of femininity that he seizes on wherever possible, on movie screens, in the street, in his classroom, on his living-room sofa. And when she tries to talk to him, her absence from the screen, her absence from the scene and from his life negates her as the subject of her own discourse, of her own desire.

All of Rainer's movies have dealt with the question of the sexual impasse. In *Lives of Performers* (1972), the dilemma of a man who can't choose between two women and makes them both suffer is expressed in choreographic and performance art terms. There is also a scene of emotional and sexual disagreement at the core of *Film about a Woman Who* (1974). A man and a woman are lying side by side on a bed (actually, a

²⁴ Excerpts of the script of *Film about a Woman Who* have been published in *October* no 2, Summer 1976, pp 39-67.

²⁵ Bérénice Reynaud, 'Interview avec Yvonne Rainer', op cit.

large table). The woman, unable to express an obscure resentment against the man, decides instead to 'demand his affection'. They make love, and she 'participates with pleasure, but something is still bugging her'. The morning after, she realises that she has somehow 'betrayed' herself, and that it is preventing her from experiencing her real feelings (rage as well as love) towards the man.²⁴ Except for one or two lines, the scene is silent: it is composed of short sequences intercut with typed out dialogues or commentaries on the action.

In *Kristina Talking Pictures* (1976), the heroine (Yvonne Rainer), a lion tamer, is in bed (a real bed, this time), with her lover, the sailor Raoul (played by the film-maker's own brother). Again, there are two bodies, two parallel discourses that do not meet. Kristina tries to explain to Raoul the petty acts of cowardice and betrayal she has been guilty of. He wants to tell her the story of his travels. The scene is shot frontally, but in a fragmented manner, with very short shots, taken from slightly different points of view, and edited to heighten their artificiality (jump cuts, interrupted gestures, etc). From time to time a panning shot slides against the walls surrounding the bed, and scrutinises the pictures that are pinned on it, including that of a male organ: the symbol of the master-signifier present in this scene. The day after, Raoul has gone.

In *Journeys from Berlin* the presentation of the central couple is made through a new choreography of bodies and editing, a new connection between the image and the soundtrack. We see an anonymous man and woman, who will not touch or speak to one another, shot in black-and-white in the midst of colour sequences. They stand near the porch of a German church, walk toward each other, then move further away. . . . Their respective positions are abruptly permuted through editing, which creates a tension, an expectation that will not be fulfilled. The same shots, the same elements, the same permutations are repeated during the entire sequence, while the soundtrack tells a very different story: that of two New York intellectuals, a man and a woman, *whom the spectator never sees*, who meet to cook and discuss politics together. At the moment of the black-and-white sequence, they read to each other excerpts from the memoirs of Vera Zasulich and Alexander Berkman, each describing an attempted political assassination, in the name of the 'cause'. The vividness and excitement of the soundtrack contrasts with the formal, quiet, discreet and faintly elegiac aspect of the image. Rainer comments:

*At the visual level, nothing is consummated. And, at the level of discourse, it is entirely about consummation. There is in me a refusal, a resistance to show things happening . . . a refusal to let the characters connect with each other. . . .*²⁵

Such a refusal, which Rainer links artistically with the tradition of American avant-garde cinema, is prompted by the fact that, no more

than the act of analysis in its essence, *the sexual relation cannot be represented*. It is only possible to find metaphors for it, equivalences, metonymies (for example, porn cinema, eminently metonymic, which thinks it can represent the sexual relation by close-ups of organs more or less in motion; its relevant feature is the repeated use of the male sex ejaculating *outside the body of the woman*, that is to say at the moment when intercourse has been interrupted). As Lacan argued in *Encore*, the reason for such an impossibility, for this gap in representation, is that 'the sexual relation does not exist.' For Lacan, the failure, the 'missed encounter' is at the core of 'the sexual relation', and of 'the analytic relation' as well. According to him, there are not only one, but two ways of 'failing' the sexual relation. A 'male' way, and then 'another'. The specifically male failure is defined along phallic lines. For the phallus is nothing but 'the conscientious objection one of the two sexed beings makes against service to the other. . . . Phallic *jouissance* is the obstacle preventing man . . . from experiencing *jouissance* of the woman's body, precisely because what he then experiences, is *jouissance* of the organ'.²⁶ The other way of failing the sexual relation is the feminine way of being 'not-whole' in relation to the phallic function, in relation to language. Lacan adds: 'This failure is the only form of realisation of this relation, if, as I posit it, there is no sexual relation.'²⁷ And this impossibility is, from the outset, related to issues pertaining to discourse, hence to representation. 'The sexual relation cannot be written. Everything that is written is based on the fact that it will be forever impossible to write the sexual relation as such. This gives way to a certain effect of discourse called *écriture*.'²⁸

Similarly, one may say that, since its impure and popular origin as nickelodeon, the very existence of cinema displays an effort to represent the unrepresentable, namely, the sexual relation. The situation of the scopophilic drive, however, differs from that of the desire to write, since it corresponds to the desire to repeat an event that has already happened, on a real or fantasmatic level: the primal scene, whereby the child has supposedly witnessed intercourse between its parents. What is remarkable in the primal scene is not only that the subject figures in it as an unwanted third party, but also that he understands only imperfectly what is happening, so that, years later, he will dream, for example, of white wolves with long furry tails gazing at him through an open window – all of this to deny the terrifying reality, glimpsed during the scene, of the Mother's lack of penis.²⁹ There is, then, in the primal scene, always a blind spot, something that the subject *cannot* see, *wants* not to see.

The *mise-en-scène* of *The Man Who Envied Women* is organised around this blind spot, and the strength of the movie lies in the fact that, instead of being used to 'fill up' the image, to 'narrate' the story of the relationship between the characters invisible on the screen, to 'furnish' the empty space between them, language functions to express this blind spot, this hole. Not only does language have holes; language bores holes in the image. It is no longer the image, specular fascination, which func-

²⁶ Jacques Lacan, *Encore*, op cit, p 13.

²⁷ *ibid*, p 54.

²⁸ *ibid*, pp 34-35.

²⁹ Sigmund Freud, 'The Wolf Man', in *Three Case Histories*, New York, Collier, 1963, pp 187-315, in particular the chapter 'The Dream and the Primal Scene', pp 213-234.

tions to halt narration, as in classical narrative cinema, but language which 'de-narrativises' the story – and this in spite of the dense and at times unbearable quality of the text. This density expresses its vacuity. In *The Man Who Envied Women* people talk because they do not communicate anything (or rather, because they communicate *nothing*).

The dialogue is composed for the most part of 'found texts' used as found or reworked. There is an important documentary aspect in the film that should not be overlooked. Some sequences, shot in Super-8 or in video – whose grainy aspect, a bit 'fuzzy', a bit 'clumsy', contrasts with Mark Daniels' elegant, accomplished cinematography in the 16mm sequences – document political events involving part of the New York intelligentsia (and Yvonne Rainer in particular, which constitutes the autobiographical element of the film): the hearing opposing the supporters of the Artists Housing Project to the ethnic minorities of the Lower East Side; the preparatory meetings for the Artists Call protests against US intervention in Latin America. The texts reworked by the director function also as documents on some New York *mores*: the role played by theories, more or less well assimilated; the omnipresence of the media; the role played by feminist controversy in social intercourse; a certain 'well-meaning' liberalism; and, finally, the 'current ideology' made up of sincere indignation, bits of popular wisdom, vast naïveté, stupidity, and, sometimes, viciousness. Such is the patchwork of phrases picked up by Rainer in the course of her social life, her reading, which she scatters throughout her film, in a street corner, at a coffee-shop table, in a party full of leftist intellectuals: 'Women don't get hassled on the streets of Managua.' 'A feminist is a man who's found a new way to meet broads'. 'I'm not trying to pin him down or anything . . . just get him to bed. . . .' 'Just because I like to look at pictures of erections doesn't mean I'm homosexual.' 'The bottom line is, women really *do* want to devour men.' 'In the universal mind nothing is ever lost. And sure enough, on retracing my steps, I found my glasses.' 'He says he doubted if most women would mind being raped. And *then* he said, after all, the vagina is only an orifice like any other.' 'Christianity demands that while living or thinking of herself as a virgin impregnated by the Word, [woman] lives and thinks of herself as a male homosexual.'

One cannot help thinking of the look cast by Woody Allen in *Manhattan* or *Annie Hall* on a certain class of New York intellectuals, but Rainer's project is, more deeply, akin to that of Flaubert in *Bouvard and Pécuchet*. Here, too, the project is to make a statement on the stupidity which, in a society, accompanies the assimilation of scraps of science, theory, reading and half-knowledge in circulation. Flaubert's anti-heroes, however, are two middle-aged men, while it is within the heterosexual couple, and in particular in its female component, that Rainer encounters the stumbling-block of language. Something fails to be processed. It is the signifier which is 'the cause of *jouissance*. Without the signifier, how could we even grasp this part of the body?' However, 'in so far as it is the term of *jouissance*, the signifier is also what brings it to a

stop.³⁰ It is because it is always askew in relation to *jouissance* that the signifier is 'stupid'. And, consequently, that 'the subject is, properly speaking, he whom we [psychoanalysts] urge not to say everything, as we tell him to seduce him – one cannot say everything – but to say stupidities, that's it'³¹. Just like Jack Deller, who fancies that he is going to 'tell all she [if one accepts our interpretation that his analyst is, finally, a woman] wants to know', to pour out his overflow of knowledge on her, and who ends up, precisely, making stupid statements about women.

The situation described by Rainer, that of our modernity, is that the more we talk, the more we utter stupidities, and the less we experience *jouissance*. Yet, if we did not talk, we would experience *jouissance* even less. So, the end of the movie presents two versions of the impossibility of the couple. Trisha is compelled to coin a new word for her incapability to have satisfying relationships with men. 'I cannot live without men, but I can live without a man. . . . I know there will sometimes be excruciating sadness. But I also know something is different now. Something in the direction of *unwomanliness*. Not a new woman, not a non-woman or misanthropist or anti-woman, not a non-practicing lesbian. Maybe *unwoman* is also the wrong term. *A-woman* is closer. *A-womanly*. *A-womanliness*.'

The second version of the couple is more comical; it deals with the violence of verbal seduction and triggers a sort of infernal ballet, a *danse macabre*. Before, we had seen Jack Deller seducing his young assistant by making use of his intellectual authority, while the lighting gradually transformed this banal scene by bathing it in a *noirish* atmosphere. At the end of the movie, Deller goes to a party where he meets an ex-girlfriend, Jackie (Jackie Raynal), a French intellectual, feminist and post-marxist. They find themselves squeezed in a corridor that, ironic-

³⁰ Jacques Lacan, *Encore* op cit, p 27.

³¹ *ibid*, p 25.



Seductions: William Raymond and Jackie Raynal at the party.

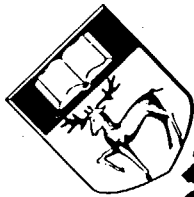
³² Meaghan Morris, 'The Pirate's Fiancée', in Meaghan Morris and Paul Patton (eds), *Michel Foucault: Power, Truth, Strategy*, Sydney, Feral Publications, 1979.

ally, leads to the bathroom, and, like all the couples in Rainer's previous movies, get closer without touching each other, entwine without embracing, ogle each other provocatively, perform a whole ritual of posturing, sexual thrusts and parries, while exchanging, like so many attacks, bits of theory. He quotes Foucault about the pervasiveness of centres of power, and looks at her as if he wants both to kiss and slap her. She answers him with a very funny text by the Australian feminist Meaghan Morris, and a demure look that could mean 'He's a cute kid, but he's pulling my leg.' The battle of the sexes, removed from the bedroom (*Woman Who...*, *Kristina...*) and the kitchen (*Journeys...*) now opens out in the theoretical arena (who is the matador, who is the bull?). But is there fair play here either, aren't the dice loaded? As Jackie says: 'If a girl takes her eyes off Lacan and Derrida long enough to look, she may discover that she is the invisible man.'³²

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SEDUCTION HOT AND COLD

MARTHA GEVER REPORTS ON US
WOMEN'S VIDEOS IN THE EIGHTIES

¹ Martha Gever, 'Video Politics: Early Feminist Projects', in *Cultures in Contention*, Seattle, Real Comet Press, 1985.

² Of course, documentary videotapes informed by feminism continue to be produced. A few titles of US work made in the eighties that could be placed in this category are *Gotta Make This Journey*, by Michelle Parkerson; *From Bedside to Bargaining Table* and *Prescription for Change*, by Tami Gold and Lynn Goldfarb; and *Just Because of Who We Are*, by the Heramedia collective.

A FEW YEARS AGO, writing about the conjunction of feminist politics and alternative video during the '70s in the United States, I ended on a sour note, citing a number of factors that contributed to a decline in the production and circulation of feminist documentary tapes.¹ Encouraged by an editor to provide an upbeat ending to my study of this short-lived but energetic and decidedly political movement (which, in addition to prodigious documentary production, included exchanges of video letters among feminist media collectives and several national women's video festivals), I consented to establish some link between that work of a past decade and the present. But the effort to substantiate a connection proved futile, and my concluding litany of obstacles to overtly political feminist video remained intact.² What I didn't notice, or couldn't account for in a couple of paragraphs, was that women making video about women had adapted to a changing political climate, and the work thus produced evidenced a changing set of attitudes regarding women and television. Broadly speaking, allowing for a variety of contingencies, this shift has been away from positivism toward negativity.

First, the positive. The video documentaries made by US feminists in the '70s paralleled feminist documentary projects in other fields that described the social conditions experienced by women, as well as collective programmes intended to enlarge the social opportunities available to them. The topics of those tapes were reproduction, healthcare, childcare, employment and domestic labour, rape, battering, legal problems

and prison conditions and so on. These projects also constituted attempts at self-definition, contradicting the stereotypes that parade through the mass media and through social consciousness, coupled with demands that the media show 'real' women, i.e., unidealised women defined according to women's experiences, not men's fantasies. The methods employed were often derived from empirical, positivist social science³ – codified in the forms of documentary realism – and used to expose the process of 'socialization' of women coerced by institutional constraints (the institution of heterosexuality or discrimination in employment, for instance). The proposed antidote to oppressive patriarchal ideology took the form of 'positive images' and 'positive role models' meant to refute false stereotypes. Realist documentary scenes and testimony (dependent on the conventions of 'camera truth') were enlisted as factual proof of women's oppression, in contrast to the myths entailed in socialisation myths supplying men with justifications for domination, setting examples for exploitation, lending social relations that privilege men an aura of eternal authority.

Concrete political activity in the late '60s and early '70s and the theorising that accompanied the growth of a feminist political movement named the objectification of women as both cause and effect of women's powerlessness. Dissecting the ideology of gender seemed crucial, but rescuing more positive possibilities for female identity proved to be a process of chasing shadows, since identity itself, the apprehension of the self, was constructed through systems of representation – culture. At the most fundamental levels, women had to rethink the problems of vision and voice, how and why silence and invisibility are conditions of 'femininity', how social categories of male and female were not simply imposed by economic relations but appeared as well-entrenched psychological mechanisms, how 'being a woman' happened, and how myth and fantasy interacted, inducing pleasure while fixing the boundaries of an inferior social position for women.

Myths, then, could be re-read as a product of the unconscious and employed to solve the puzzle of what femininity means for women and why it is repressed by, but necessary to, the operations of patriarchal culture. Rather than substituting more positive representations of women in place of sexist stereotypes, this tack led to the refusal to admit representative women at all, making the stereotypes speak for themselves to reveal the tricks of the ventriloquists' trade. Related to this were celebrations of what has been taken as negative, ineffable and unrepresentable, using unruly femininity to unhinge masculine ideas about reality. Both approaches I call negativity.

Granted, this sketchy summary repeats now clichéd stories of political positions entailed in varying feminist theories and methods – on the American side of the Atlantic, what has been described at heated moments as a face-off between 'radical feminism' and 'cultural feminism'.⁴ To construct an account of US women's video in the '80s as a by-product of theoretical debates, most often conducted in academic settings, presumes a pattern of influence that would be misleading. For

³ The nineteenth-century social theory, introduced by Comte, whereby social analysis and reform was predicated on 'positive or scientific understanding, based only on observable facts and the relations between them, and the laws discovered from observing them' – Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1976, p 200.

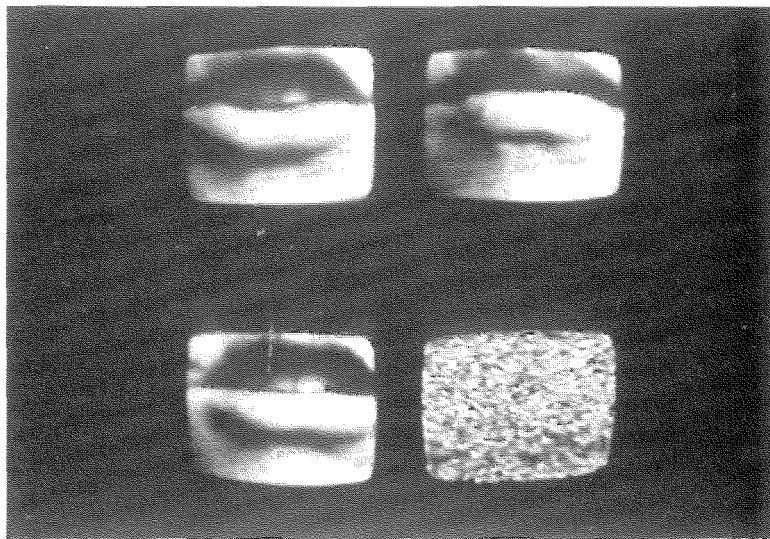
⁴ See, for example, Alice Echols, 'The Taming of the Id: Feminist Sexual Politics, 1968-83' in Carol Vance (ed), *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, Boston, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984.

the most part, video produced outside the mass media industries in the US (including video by women about women) has been shaped by the relationship to these industries and an interest in mass culture. But it is due to feminism, of course, that women participate with this constellation of interests, even as renegades. As far as I know, few of the tapes I will discuss here were specifically declared 'feminist' by their producers – although in exhibition contexts many of them have been. Intentions aside, however, the feminist component of this work seems to me undeniable, and perhaps useful to feminist criticism.

In this regard, it's particularly notable that feminists delving into the unconscious looking for formations of gender identity have often found correspondences with mass culture. The recognition that an idealised feminine identity was illusory directed attention to shared popular fantasies, where individual identification meets social position. This conceptual move coincided, not accidentally, with analyses of the expanding influence of electronic communications. In mass media, the mythic constructions that feminists have cited inform the content of everyday life: myths about nature, power, morality, conflict, order. . . . Indeed, knowledge itself is proffered through the technology of a vast system of communications, the industry of mass media where we, the masses of women (and men and children, feminised in their passivity) are expected to consume ideology. We are conceived as the objects of media seduction, our critical brains presumably lulled into conformity by the pleasures of entertainment, excited by vicarious, voyeuristic danger, offered the thrill of transgression, but always reassured that social order will prevail – or, at least, the Wheel of Fortune will continue to spin.

In many contemporary videotapes produced by women, taking on guises borrowed from popular television – whether the sexual intrigue of romance or the sexualised idioms of advertising or MTV, to name a few – provides a method for acting out the intersections of women's fantasies, mass media representations and male domination. It's the last component that places this video work in the political domain. And central to all these tapes are themes associated with the psychology of femininity: passivity, romance, the female body, sexual relations, mothers/daughters/fathers, seduction.

The seductions in my title, then, are these: the hot seduction of sexual tension and the cool seduction attributed to TV. In my crypto-history of feminism and video in the US, a fascination with mass media appears at the point where positive propositions within feminism shift to negative. And in the late '70s, women making art *about* women, using television, began reproducing feminine objects. Perhaps the most reductive is Dara Birnbaum's obsessive repetition of one Wonder Woman gesture, a fetish object in motion going nowhere, in *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman* (1978). Another easy example is Max Almy's isolated, exaggerated, idealised, perfect mouth in tapes like *Modern Love* (1979) and *Deadline* (1981). Or Judith Barry's female zombie in *Casual Shopper* (1982). Or the pretty but paralysed protagonist in Candace Reckinger's *Impossible Love* (1983). Or the sleeping beauty in Cecilia Condit's



Modern Love, by Max Almy, 1979.

Beneath the Skin (1981). Or the spectrum of female impersonators, all played by Ann Magnuson, in *Made for TV* (1985).

Such figures replicate the feminine tropes common to television and, when the psychological investment of women in mythic fantasies is open to question, the television industry displays plenty of up-to-the-minute evidence. Television in particular, since on TV masculine ideology meshes so efficiently with other articulations of power – official political speech, say, or crime stories. And the complementary idea of woman conforms so neatly with the blank screen of TV, filled with projections of masculine adventure and prowess. For women, too, popular television persistently presents a coherent social matrix. For instance, in her analysis of soap opera melodramas, Tania Modleski concludes, 'What the spectator is looking at, and perhaps longing for, is a kind of *extended family*, the direct opposite of her own isolated nuclear family. . . . The fantasy here is truly a "collective" fantasy – a fantasy of community. . . .'⁵ She goes on to counsel feminists,

*[I]t is important to recognize that soap opera allays **real** anxieties, satisfies **real** needs and desires, even while it may distort them. The fantasy of community is not only a real desire . . . it is a salutary one. As feminists, we have the responsibility to devise ways of meeting these needs that are more creative, honest, and interesting than the ones mass culture has supplied.*⁶

What can seem troubling for feminists is that, as viewers, we're part of the eager audiences for images and stories that reiterate the hierarchy of masculinity and femininity, day after day, season after season.⁷ Plots and characters may superficially substitute modern career women ('positive images?') for housewives, but women on TV inevitably achieve an existence through men and/or family, through maternity and/or love. Artists working this vein, then, also attempt to engage femi-

⁵ Tania Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women*, New York, Methuen, 1982, p 108.

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ I'm thinking here of Joan Braderman's words in her videotape *Joan Does Dynasty*: 'I confess my unreconstructed *Dynasty* delection, though I have the intellectual tools to deconstruct its odious subtext. Does this tell you anything? Is deconstructing it merely the invention of a new way to love it?'

⁸ This exhibition originated at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston in 1984 and was co-curated by Podheiser and Bob Riley, the video curator at the ICA. The show was subsequently shown at a number of museums and media centres throughout the US.

nine imagination, playing the contradictory elements of mass media for subversive effect.

In the programme notes for the American Federation of Art's touring exhibition 'Revising Romance: New Feminist Video', a show that includes a number of the tapes referred to here, co-curator Linda Podheiser writes:

*One of the most disturbing motifs [in the show] is the crucial role 'expected' feminine passivity plays in the sadomasochistic dialectic [sic] that underlies so many romantic models. The videotapes . . . not only present characters who are unavoidably or unwittingly complicitous in their own victimization but they also – with some dark delight – allow us to glimpse the potentially murderous rage that exists just below the surface of female masochism.*⁸

Indeed, many tapes by and about women made in the late '70s and the '80s are filled with murderers and victims, *femmes fatales* and cadaverous females. The horror show that takes shape as a particularly feminine mental condition, typically hysterical, is surely metaphorical. But what rhetoric is operating here? In *Beneath the Skin* and Barbara Broughel's *Lesson # 1: Trouble in Paradise* (1981) female victims are done in by their own fantasies. A recurring image in Condit's *Beneath the Skin* is a superimposition of a mummy's skull on the face of a sleeping woman, marking an identification between the narrator, who relates a nightmarish story about her boyfriend's murder of his previous lover, and his decomposed victim. Broughel's main character is a disoriented housewife whose home seems to be inhabited by goblins; in the tape's final scene she is discovered dead on her kitchen floor following a visit from a creepy travelling salesman. *Pink Pyjamas* (1983), by Betsy Newman, describes the recollections and reflections of a woman destined for public execution, her punishment for the primal crime of murdering her



Beneath the Skin, by
Cecelia Condit, 1981.

parents along with a few more or less random victims. As she tells it, she was also a victim – of physical abuse, psychotropic drugs and financial hardship. *Made for TV*, a showcase for Magnuson's talented mimicry of an array of female television personae, underscores her serialised stereotypes with death images, concluding in an apocalypse of channel-switching frenzy.

Other tapes, in various ways, trace the emptiness of dead-ended female existence. A female off-screen voice in *Impossible Love* repeats disconnected phrases about profound alienation. Shots of stark spaces and expressionless faces echo the bland narration, save in one scene, repeated several times, where two male intruders grab, gag and tie up a woman. Broughel's *Lesson # 2: The Frigid Heiress* (1983), though whimsical, portrays a woman as icy as the title implies. The setting of Barry's *Casual Shopper* is a sterile, generic shopping mall, where an aimless woman and the man who catches her eye resemble mannequins, as lifeless as the goods they fondle. In *Soap* (1982), by Deans Keppel, an off-screen voice conveys the self-pity of a woman abandoned by her boyfriend, her sentiments mirrored in the soap opera dialogues in the background. Using a split-screen device to create a sequence of overlapping monologues in *Modern Love*, Almy builds a schematic narrative of romance, from love's bloom to its withering. After one cycle, however, the four segments run simultaneously at equal volume, and the story becomes a closed circuit.

Anarchic and ordinary, the feminine icons and myths these women artists summon to bring women's fearful fantasies to the small screen exude negativity. (An aside: The absence of lesbian fantasies in these tapes is remarkable. Although the cannibalistic duo in Condit's *Possibly in Michigan*, 1983, team up to seduce and dismember a sadistic man, they hardly count. They are cast as caricatured cute schoolgirl best friends, more sexually threatened by than threatening to the male monsters who pursue them.) These figures and their movements appear to offer a proposition: the wedding of the seductive spectacle of woman – a sexual promise – with the seductive pull of mass media and, as a result, an assumption of power by women. Seduction is a familiar female scene. Here feminine skills – wiles and ploys, as these have been called – can be exploited, and the skilful seductress can activate her pleasure. Here, at least, is some power attributed to women. The seductive methods employed in these videotapes – the looks-like-TV look or the clichés of good looks, for example – confirm the fascination with mass media at work. The *performance* of female seduction, on the other hand, depends on the sadomasochistic content Podheiser notes.

In Laclos' eighteenth century novel *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*⁹ the successful, scheming Marquise de Merteuil explains to her equally devious partner in social crimes, the Vicomte de Valmont, the disparate options for men and women in the game of seduction. That game, she tells him, requires women to perfect defences, always operating from a position of passive powerlessness, charming each man into believing that her pleasure is really his. She must appear ravishing, but virtuous, to avoid

⁹ Choderlos de Laclos, *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1961.

¹⁰ Recall the courage of Nora Astorga, now Nicaraguan ambassador to the United Nations, who lured a high-ranking Somoza official into her house where her Sandinista comrades intended to kidnap him and negotiate an exchange of prisoners; instead he was killed in the fray.

being raped or condemned to boring celibacy. If she loses control, she's lost. In no way does her elaborate charade alter her social vulnerability. Masculine conquest, in contrast, entails fewer social risks, therefore less craft. Manipulating behind the scenes, *à la* Marquise, women video-makers may exercise the feminine advantage in order to unsettle smug notions of social niceties. But those who play with seduction labour under the sign of negativity: a seductive virtuosa outdoes her female rivals. Competition ensues. Community is unthinkable. In political terms, seduction can be a tactic but never a strategy.¹⁰

These video stories of woman's place in patriarchal culture, told in personal voices from women's point of view, rely on wit and sometimes wickedness comparable to Laclos' Marquise. Such moves are calculated to demystify (even flaunt) passivity and indicate a potential for rebellion – through symbolic murder or simply through parody. If, however, as this aggregate video work indicates, the artifice of ideal femininity permeates our cultural mythology to the detriment of women, related cultural myths that mask forms of social control, such as the political neutrality of the business of electronic communications, remain unexposed. Rather, the faithfulness to television's familiar mechanisms – its claim to authority – betrays a surrender to an ideological institution that perpetuates hierarchies of domination. More examples come to mind: Branda Miller's *That's It Forget It* (1985), cut and paced like a music video, energetically affirms the kind of idealised self-images of adolescent girls purveyed in *Seventeen* magazine. The obsessive close-ups evident in many of these tapes, but pronounced in *Soap*, elicit claustrophobia but also induce fascination. The continuity editing and smooth,



That's It Forget It, by Branda Miller, 1985.

precise camera work in *Casual Shopper* and *Possibly in Michigan* simulate popular television forms. And, notably, all the visible women in every tape I've mentioned, *without exception*, are youthful, white, conventionally attractive – a set of almost identical Barbie Dolls.

The bleak scenarios, inescapable repetitions and deathly spectacles found in the videotapes named here may well supply material for the analysis of (some) feminine fantasies. But they vacate the possibilities for female action by reducing this to a death wish and, thus, abandon the possibility of representing active women. Christa Wolf reviews the legacy of classical Western mythology and asks, 'Does it seem misguided to you to believe that if woman had helped think "thought" over the last two thousand years, the life of thought would be different today? (We forget too easily: woman as intellectual has existed in appreciable numbers only for the last sixty or seventy years . . .)'.¹¹ Observing the dilemma of women intellectuals who undertake the political task of mobilising female subjectivity, she argues:

*I claim that every woman in this century and in our cultural sphere who has ventured into male-dominated institutions – 'literature' and 'aesthetics' are such institutions [add 'communications', 'cinema', and 'visual art' – the three institutions that constitute 'video'] – must have experienced the desire for self-destruction. In her novel *Malina* Ingeborg Bachmann has the woman disappear inside the wall at the end, and the man Malina, who is part of her, serenely states the case: 'There is no woman here.'*

The last sentence reads: 'It was murder'.¹²

Wolf adds, 'It was also suicide'. Suicide is produced by hopelessness, a loss of purpose. Suicide means defeat or, perhaps, an absolute refusal to participate in the society where one lives. I quote Wolf quoting and commenting on Bachmann because her words seem to make sense of my own perceptions of defeat and hopelessness when watching so much of the video made by women, meant to engage women and contradict mass media. But self-destruction should not have the last word in a discussion of feminism and alternative cultural forms. Nor should negativity be discarded wholesale, since the vocabulary of negativity has provided a framework for many doubts about the fallacies assumed by timeless, presumably untainted feminine objects, the traps laid by battling old myths with new myths, and, most importantly, the ideological dimension of personal identity – of the male self and the female self. This does not suggest a politics of therapy or self-improvement, but a move to the social plane, where feminism takes shape. The participation of women in culture is, as Wolf understands, a historical process. Although in the past decade US videomakers have frequently chosen subjects suggested by feminism¹³, what a sampling of such work demonstrates is that systems of representation cannot be undone on the level of representation alone – neither by negative nightmares nor positive embellishments.

¹¹ Christa Wolf, *Cassandra: A Novel and Four Essays*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1984, p 294.

¹² *ibid.*, p 299.

¹³ I've intentionally omitted discussions of related work by male artists, such as Bruce and Norman Yonemoto's *Vault* and Pier Matton's *Like Men*.

DISTRIBUTION MATTERS: CIRCLES

CAROLINE MERZ CHRONICLES AN
INFLUENTIAL BRITISH DISTRIBUTOR AND
PRATIBHA PARMAR EXAMINES SOME
RECENT OFFERINGS

Distribution has always been the least visible side of the film business. Audiences don't usually care *where* the film or video they're watching has come from, just so long as it's there in front of their eyes: many people only become aware that distributors exist when they want to see a film they've read or heard about and can't understand why it isn't available for screening at their local cinema.

For almost a decade now there has been a sector of UK film distribution which has struggled to challenge this ignorance and has striven to help create an 'integrated practice' (which may seem a dated term, but is nevertheless still valid) linking film-makers, exhibitors and audiences in a manner unthinkable to the hierarchies of the mainstream, commercial industry. Quite possibly, it is the specialised women's film distributors who have achieved the highest profile, and the strongest influence.

The impact of one of these distributors, Circles, has been out of all proportion to its modest size and chronic financial insecurity. Ten years ago, it is safe to say that virtually no one other than specialist historians had even heard of such pioneer silent film-makers as Alice Guy and Lois Weber, never mind having the opportunity actually to see some of their films: if these films are now familiar to many students, women's groups, and wider audiences, this is largely to the credit of Circles.

Circles began in 1979 and produced its first catalogue of about 30 films early in 1980. Like Cinema of Women, it emerged as part of – and drew many of its political practices from – the women's liberation movement. Part of the impetus for the creation of an alternative

distribution network for women came from the painful experience suffered in 1979 by Lis Rhodes and Felicity Sparrow, when they were enlisted, with others, to contribute to an Arts Council exhibition on 'experimental' film at the Hayward Gallery, London. The women saw this turning into an inherently anti-feminist event –

*a closed art exhibition which presents its subject anonymously, defining its truth in Letraset and four-foot display panels, denying the space within it to answer back . . . an academic dream, the uncomplicated pattern where everything fits . . .*¹

– and they responded by withdrawing their painstakingly researched work altogether and leaving the gallery space blank.

Their research on the neglected or 'forgotten' women of film history was not, however, wasted, but found a more productive outlet than it could ever have done at the Hayward. Films by Alice Guy, Germaine Dulac and Maya Deren, with appropriate documentation, were packaged for screening: together with contemporary feminist films, these formed the basis for the company's sustained intervention into film acquisition and distribution.

Circles has always had a strong allegiance to experimental film-making: many films in its original list came from members of the London Filmmakers Co-op and Four Corners, as well as

¹ For an account of the feminist withdrawal from the exhibition, see Jane Clarke, Jeanette Iljohn, Mary Pat Leece, Pat Murphy, Annabel Nicolson, Lis Rhodes, Felicity Sparrow and Susan Shin, 'Women and the Formal Film', in Phillip Drummond (ed), *Film as Film*, Arts Council of Great Britain, 1979.

video, performance and slide-tape artists. In contrast, Cinema of Women began largely as an outlet for campaigning films on women's work. Later, both groups would expand their parameters to take in full-length features, narrative and non-narrative work, tape and film. Both, however, have maintained a distinctive approach in acquiring work for distribution – their differing profiles can be clearly seen by looking at their respective 1987 catalogues.

Initially resisting the 'feminist' label, Circles nevertheless had some very specific aims from the outset. One was a commitment to re-presenting the work of forgotten or neglected women of film history as well as contemporary work. Programmes of films by Alice Guy, Germaine Dulac, Maya Deren and Lois Weber have proved consistently successful in terms of bookings. A second difference between Circles' operation and that of other distributors has been in the close involvement of the film-makers whose work they take up with the running of the organisation. All women whose films Circles distribute automatically become members, which means they have the right to become involved in creating policy.

A third important factor has been Circles' commitment to returning the highest possible revenue to film-makers, many of whom are not waged for their work, and a refusal to undercut their rental prices by providing what would, in effect, be subsidised programming. Most of Circles' films are (of necessity) 'shorts' and could well be shown alongside features shown in, for instance, regional film theatres. Traditionally, exhibitors have tended to take it for granted that they should be able to pick up short films for nominal fees – and to imply that they are doing the independent film-maker a favour by taking them on any terms. It's profoundly ironic that this should still be the case when the exhibitors in question are the British Film Institute or other 'enlightened' independent exhibitors rather than the big, bad circuits of old.

For non-theatrical programmers, too, the relatively high rental charges can cause problems. Film hire budgets for most educational courses are small, and a course on recent feminist cinema can cost twice or three times as much as, say, one on the western or other 'classic' genres; an economic imperative thus dictating, all too often, the structure and content of such courses.

Despite these difficulties – which seem unlikely to be resolved in the present economic/cultural climate – Circles has developed some successful strategies to allow its films to be seen by as wide a range of audiences as possible. A notable intervention has been the development of film packages (transferred onto video) organised around themes such as women and mental health, women and work, women and domestic labour and so on, which bring together films from different places, times and forms. The 'Who's Calling Us Crazy?' package, for instance, includes films which are, formally, extremely diverse and which make many demands on their audience. The popularity of these packages can't simply be explained by the fact that they provide an easy way out of the complexities of programming; it also demonstrates that audiences are prepared to get involved with non-narrative and distinctly 'difficult' films if the subject interests them and the context is right.

When Circles was set up it was forced to run (like Cinema of Women) on an entirely voluntary basis without funding or premises, although in 1980 it began receiving some grant aid – initially for the purchase of new prints – from the local borough council, Tower Hamlets. During the next seven years funding slowly built up. But in April 1987, the Liberal administration in Tower Hamlets, rate-capped for the first time, withdrew funds from 16 of the 19 arts organisations it supported. Some organisations had their grants drastically reduced: some, like Circles, were cut entirely. A fight-back campaign was launched, other funding bodies including the BFI were involved; and in July '87 Circles learned that the British Film Institute would take up the funding previously provided by Tower Hamlets.

One effect of the crisis has been to highlight the contradictions inherent in trying to run a business which, in its very nature, will always have to remain essentially non-commercial. Circles' policies are not against self-sufficiency, but its commitment to getting recognition for independent work means (unfortunately) that large-scale income is unlikely to be generated. At a time when words like 'investment' and 'rationalisation' have crept into the vocabulary of even the arts funding bodies, it means that distributors like Circles and Cinema of Women, who must rely to some extent on subsidy, are threatened and thrown into competition with one

68 another. As Jenny Holland, one of Circles' workers puts it, 'They're asking "why do we need two women's distributors"', but the question should be reformulated as "why don't we need more?"'

Certainly, there's no shortage of work on film and video being produced by women throughout the country; and over the years Circles has built up strong links with independent workshops whose products can now be seen by a far wider community than that which they could hope to reach on their own. Films like Sheffield Co-op's *Red Skirts on Clydeside* and Birmingham Workshop's *Property Rites* have been widely shown in all kinds of contexts, including television: and, importantly, these contexts have been strongly affected or even determined by the fact of the films' mediation through a feminist distributor. As Jane Root has argued about Cinema of Women²: 'perhaps most important of all from a feminist point of view, distribution strategies directly affect *who* makes up the audience for any particular film.' This is also true, of course, of the many non-UK, non-workshop films which Circles has taken up. Its range of titles has expanded to encompass a more global perspective, and now includes films from Jamaica and Colombia as well as those made in the USA, Australia and Canada.

The vast majority of these films are of less than feature length, however, ranging from a couple of minutes to an hour in length. Of the 200 or so films Circles now distributes, only a handful are features: and the problems which arise in relation to features are not only economic ones. At the recent Créteil festival, for instance, a panel of successful women directors were asked whether – if a feminist distribution company existed in France – they would lodge their films with it. None of them would reply.

To explore the reasons for their silence would involve getting right to the heart of the conflict for women film-makers today between the possibility of immediate, short-term success and longer-term goals of building up solid structures through an allegiance to feminist distribution. Not that the choice rests solely with a film's

producer, of course: the distribution of feature films for theatrical release involves a high level of financial risk. But, as Circles notes, 'Risk is inevitable when distributing films, particularly in the current economic climate. Since commercial viability is not our prime motive, our policy is not to prioritise features over shorts, but to recognise each film-maker's work in its own right and its contribution to independent practice. Otherwise we get caught up in an argument which devalues women's work on the basis of its length. Length then becomes the operative word, setting the terms for distance, quality and marketability.'

CLAIMING VISIBILITY

One of the areas in which Circles has noted an increased demand is in films by and for black and Third World women. Out of a list of 200 films and videos it currently distributes, a growing proportion are by women from India, China, Africa, Nicaragua and by North American black women. Films like *A Tribute to Black Women* by the Liverpool Black Women's Media Project, are among an increasing number by British black women distributed by Circles. 'Black Women and Invisibility' is a new collection of films in their range of thematic 'packages' – 'Jobs for the Girls', 'Whose Calling Us Crazy?' and 'All Work and No Pay'. As June Givanni points out, 'invisibility here is about the lack of recognition by the wider community, and to some extent the black community that there are black women film-makers working in Britain. The range of films and videos made by black women available in this country is growing. This development needs the support of audiences if it is to continue; audiences who want more than entertainment from black women's films will have a feast!'

While mainstream film and television continue to distort, deform and marginalise images of black women, a very different and vibrant culture is being forged by independent black film-makers internationally. Motivated by a desire to correct the age-old distortions perpetuated by media racism, black women are fast learning the craft of film-making. An urgent need to tell our own stories is also very much on the agenda.

Ayoka Chenzira and Julie Dash are two black

² Jane Root, 'Distributing "A Question of Silence" – A Cautionary Tale', in Charlotte Brunsdon (ed), *Films for Women*, London, BFI, 1986; also published in *Screen* November-December 1985, vol 26 no 6, pp 58-64.

US film-makers who are pioneering the production of films which capture some of the experiences, thoughts and emotions of black women. Thanks to Circles' links with the Black Filmmakers Foundation in New York, British audiences had the rare opportunity of seeing their films on the independent cinema circuit in the first few months of 1987. *Syvilla: They Dance to her Drum* and *Hair Piece* by Ayoka Chenzira and *Illusions* and *Four Women* by Julie Dash were the four films toured under the heading 'Some of us are brave, all of us are strong. But how many of us do you see?' Dash's *Four Women* is an experimental dance film to a moving ballad sung by Nina Simone. The film opens with the sounds of black women in Africa, their enslavement and their subsequent survival in America. The dances tell the stories of a diversity of black women who are 'yellow', 'tan' and 'brown'; whose parents were slaves or whose mothers were raped by white slave owners. A rhythmic pace is built up in a seven-minute combination of dance and music.

A concern with history is also evident in Ayoka Chenzira's *Syvilla: They Dance to her Drum*. Made in 1979, this half-hour documentary portrays the life of the black dancer Syvilla Fort. For her, 'dancing is a way of life' and she is committed to teaching her skills to her community. 'Every step I learned I passed along to someone else.' Syvilla established herself in dance during the '60s, when there were few black women dancers on the North American stage. She pioneered a style of choreography uniquely her own and which is still a powerful influence on modern dance companies.

Chenzira's second film, *Hair Piece*, is an

animation which engages with a particular site of black women's oppression. A self-critical and pungent look at the various methods employed by and forced upon black women to make their hair 'acceptable', it combines music with a witty narrative, to create an entertaining but highly sensitive film. Chenzira's choice of animation is deliberate: 'by doing an animation and a satire there is no one (person) that you can really pass judgement on, they're all animated figures and the laughing is a way of releasing some of the pain and some of the anger.'

Julie Dash's drama, *Illusions*, uses the metaphor of film itself to expose the myths about black people that existed in Hollywood. The central character, Mignon Dupree, is an aspiring film producer determined to succeed in the world of Hollywood, where she passes for white. But an encounter with a black singer whose voice is being dubbed over that of a white actress disturbs the fragile world that Mignon has created around herself. Her painful estrangement from the mother she is forced to deny, and her increasing conflicts with a white man who discovers the truth, force Mignon to reclaim herself as a black woman. *Illusions* raises the complexity of issues around race and survival in an engaging and uncompromising way. It is a searing reminder that the cinema has a long history of appropriating black culture – a disappearing act which Circles' new package is dedicated to undoing.

'Black Women and Invisibility' is available on 16 mm and VHS from Circles, 113 Roman Road, London E2 0HU, UK. Tel: 01-981-6828.

DISTRIBUTION MATTERS: 'WHAT DOES SHE WANT?'

ADRIANE JENIK PREVIEWS A UNIQUE
HOME VIDEO SERIES

'What does she want?' The question, often attributed to Freud, has been handed down throughout history. The pronoun *she* assumed women's absence from Freud's lecture room full of analysts and disciples, an assumption which can still be said to exist today. Asking the question often, but not waiting for, listening to, or considering the importance of the answer given by the 'she' in question, serves as an allegory for the fate of many of those visual responses when they enter into the metaphorical room full of men that is the art world.

One response to this structural resistance was the development of alternative venues of exhibition and distribution that strive to promote visual art by women exclusively in order to more effectively connect those answers to an audience which was interested, even invested in, seeing artists give them. Besides the problems raised by the inevitable ghettoisation of women artists this often produced, these alternative venues, with their limited and often subsidised support networks (both aesthetic and financial) have dropped away one by one. The *What Does She Want* series (of which I am associate producer), offers a series of answers from the very present perspective of those assumed absent.

What Does She Want combines vintage and contemporary television clips in 60 to 90 minute programs. A Saturday Night Live gambit *The Planet of the Men vs. The Planet of the Women* is a battle to the death between Captain Estrogena (Jane Curtin) and Captain Macho (Hugh Hefner). A vintage Westinghouse commercial featuring stiletto-thin Betty Furness (today a consumer affairs advocate), presents an ironic embodiment of the

image of women in the media. *This Charming Couple* a Magraw-Hill how-to film from the early 1950's, directed by blacklisted filmmaker Willard Van Dyke, serves as a reminder of, and a glimpse into, our media-ted past, and evidence of education's role in creating what she wants or what she should want.¹

With impending cuts in funding and the increased activity of 'watchdog' organisations who look over the shoulder of government-funded productions and often campaign for withdrawal of their funds², it has become increasingly necessary to develop strategies of independence from these agencies. Likewise in Britain, where the main outlet for independently funded productions, the broadcast system, will surely be undergoing a thorough overhaul with the re-election of the Conservative Government, new models for the distribution of independent work are vital to the continuation of many valuable projects begun through the Channel 4 workshop system and other broadcast outlets.

In addition to the possibility of financial independence from government and corporate

¹ All italicised, single-space copy is excerpted from the *What Does She Want* series' press release, which was written in collaboration with Lyn Blumenthal and Lynne Tillman.

² i.e., a right-wing religious group, 'The 700 Club', who claimed objection to Cecilia Condit's *Possibly in Michigan*, where two women are depicted 'eating' a stew whose main ingredient is presumably the abusive man depicted earlier in the tape, by stating that the tape promoted homosexuality and was 'anti-family'. They proceeded to broadcast it over the Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN) replacing Condit's soundtrack with a poem which was meant to underscore their claims that 'the devil's work' is being done with government funds.

funding agencies, exploring and experimenting with new forms of distribution is a step toward increasing the impact of work that does continue to receive funding. In recognition of this, many funders in the US now inquire about the distribution plans for proposed productions alongside aesthetic questions. In addition to its incorporation in the overall production process, distribution has also received special attention of late, with innovative projects that range from the use of consumer video formats to the linking of grassroots and independent producers through satellite technology.³ One of these projects, the *What Does She Want* home video library series, received grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, which accounted for one third of the total series budget, to support 'the development of new audiences for experimental work within the home market'.⁴

Against this dicey backdrop are contemporary views expressed by women. Quick-change artist Ann Magnuson romps through TV's retinue of quirky characters - from Lina Hågendázovitch's latest video 'Scream Queen' to nightly newscaster Kimberly Crump - in Made for TV.

Perfect Leader, Max Almy's mock rock-video, is an exposé of the making of a politician, while Mary McFerran's revealing drama *Hommage to May 19th* is based on Weatherman Kathy Boudin's letters from prison... 'Every few minutes the guard takes notes on what I'm doing.' In Camille Billops' *Suzanne*, *Suzanne* it was Suzanne's father Brownie that held the family together. Only death released his violent stranglehold, allowing the family to come to terms with their past.

With the increased consumer usage of home video recorders in the States and in Great Britain, viewing of films has shifted from the public space of the theatre to the private arena of the home. While the current debate revolving around the implications of this shift (for the viewer, and often most passionately, for the future of public theatres) continues, the omnipresence of home video means that its theoretical dismissal may result in the wholesale exclusion of independents from this potentially receptive audience.

However, once this debate is resolved by the producer/distributor, a further problematic is engaged. The success of an independent home market project is an unprecedented occurrence,

no model exists from which to follow course.

Slick marketing techniques alone cannot be called upon to solve the plethora of problems that have confined independents to an often rarified public for years. A market that is dominated by 'entertainment' and instructional cassettes (which in some cases cultivates a need for challenging critical work) equates 'good' production with the high level, quickly edited, effect-ridden productions of Hollywood and commercial broadcast TV, narrowing the viewer's field of judgement to the exclusion of many alternative forms and messages. Add to this the reality that independent producers are rarely well known outside the independent community and cannot, as individual producers or productions, hope to generate the rentals of mainstream films. The experience of the few film-makers involved in home video projects marketed in video rental outlets under the broad category of 'independent' has been some gain in 'prestige' but little more.

Often, the idea of the 'intended audience' is increasingly abstracted and, consequently, not reached.

Program 1, We are not sugar and spice and everything nice begins with Ilene Segalove's The MOM Tapes, a witty interpretation of family discourse. During an off-screen conversation between a mother and daughter, the mother hurls a book into an empty room. The room fills with objects, material manifestations of the daughter's discontent and a clever visual metaphor for the complications of a mother/daughter relationship.

The *What Does She Want* series is attempting to deal with the problems of independent producers and their largely estranged public by taking

³ Paper Tiger Television's *Deep Dish TV*, the First National Public Access Satellite Network, which uses satellite distribution to link otherwise isolated community producers with a national base received funding from Boston Film and Video Foundation (BFVF), the Benton Foundation and the New York State Council on the Arts for its 10 part test-series which was transmitted in the Spring/Summer of 1986.

⁴ Blumenthal's original proposal submitted through the NEA Media Program included four marketing strategies: (1) the publication of one Series per year with each Series consisting of six ninety-minute programmes, (2) thematic development of each Series that ties into an already existing core audience, (3) an emphasis on subscription sales and direct marketing to build home libraries as well as repeat volume, and (4) designing into the Series a broad view of video art and documentary.

advantage of the accessible nature of home video technology and the ability of direct mail to target potential audiences. Eliminating the site-specific arena (which is often bound geographically to larger, more metropolitan areas) as well as the usual prohibitive cost of viewing independent work independent of such a site, this home video library series is in its final stages of marketing.

Conceived and produced by Lyn Blumenthal (whose Video Data Bank, which she co-directs with Kate Horsfield, has served as an important distributor of video art and documentation on artists to the educational, non-theatrical, and broadcast audience since 1976), the series transfers a curated video exhibition into a moveable, relatively affordable package, which, if successful, promises participating producers a much greater return (8,000 to 10,000 dollars return per producer on each publication run of 1,000 series) than many current distribution outlets can offer. Growing directly from Blumenthal's curatorial experience (in particular a video drive-in screened to over 20,000 in the Chicago Bandshell), the series works on the premise that people not normally accustomed to viewing experimental works will be more likely to do so if the tape/film is juxtaposed with a more recognisable title. For example, Martha Rosler's *Semiotics of the Kitchen* is rendered more accessible through its positioning directly after a vintage Kleenex table napkin advertisement which introduces the symbols of oppression that Rosler exposes in her tape. Programme 4 in the series, *Nature-Culture*, features a collection of works rooted in specific political/historical periods which are 'introduced' by political advertisements from each respective period linking the viewer to her/his TV viewing past.

Interviews with artists and critics Chris Choy, Nancy Spero, Yvonne Rainer, and Martha Rosler form the core of Women with a Past. Sections gleaned from individual interviews produced by Kate Horsfield and Lyn Blumenthal are rearranged, inventing a hybrid coffee klatch/salon.

Candid discussions on work, politics, racism, gender, relationships, sex and fantasy ensue. In the segment featuring a pre-Warner Brother's Laurie Anderson, she recalls . . .

'I was working at the time as an art reviewer, and I would just begin every review with "This artist, like Van Gogh, uses yellow." And the editor finally said, "you know, not every artist can be compared to Van Gogh. And why don't you take another tack on it . . ."

'And so, they all just started to notice, "This artist, unlike Van Gogh, does this. . . ." And so, after I was fired I stopped writing.'

Rather than ghettoising women artists, *What Does She Want* aims to prove the existence of a broad-based audience for women's work (something which traditional art and broadcast venues have not been convinced of). Response to an original mailing sent out in the fall of 1986 (which consisted of a short description of the series, naming several artists, and including a response card) has been enormous. The 21,500 piece mailing to individual men and women, which was culled from lists gathered and swapped over a two year period, garnered a return of almost 4,000 (or about 18 per cent, one-third of which were from men).

While the *What Does She Want* series is being marketed to individuals, it is not designed for a single person to passively consume. The tapes present questions and challenges, and are meant to provoke discussion and criticism. Rather than one absolute answer to the question posed in its title, the series offers many answers and enough room between them for others to be provided by the women and men who watch it.

What Does She Want will be available September 14, 1987 in VHS and Beta format. The series may be purchased individually at a rate of 69.95 dollars or by year-long subscription, receiving one tape every other month at a monthly interest-free charge of 34.97 dollars. If you wish to receive our brochure or any further information, please call or write: Video Data Bank, c/o 22 Warren Street, New York, NY, USA 10007. (212) 608-5496

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ENCOUNTER BETWEEN TWO CULTURES

A DISCUSSION WITH ULRIKE OTTINGER
INTRODUCED BY ANNETTE KUHN



Exaggeration, parody, visual metaphor: *Freak Orlando*, 1981.

To a British audience, Ulrike Ottinger's films represent a departure from what most of us imagine to be typical of the New German Cinema. Of course what we think of as New German Cinema is very much shaped by the films we've had a chance to see here. It's very much our loss that Ulrike Ottinger's work has had very little exposure in Britain – none at all outside the festival and NFT circuit. To date no British distributor has picked up any of her films. We seem to be getting a somewhat slanted view of German cinema, a view that emphasises its realistic, naturalistic qualities, its reworkings of established fictional genres such as melodrama, its engagement with recent German history. That

kind of commitment to verisimilitude and narrative transparency is absent from work by Ulrike Ottinger; her films have indeed been labelled anti-realist. But that term seems rather too limited, negative and apologetic for a body of work which takes a very strong and positive approach to its created worlds. One commentator has suggested that Ottinger works with reality in order to make it more bluntly and directly conscious than would realism. Through exaggeration, parody, visual metaphor and unexpected juxtaposition of sound and image, Ottinger creates a world suffused with fantasy and possible meanings.

Ulrike Ottinger came to film-making from a

background in fine art. She worked as a visual artist in the 1960s and began at that point to move away from the conventional notion of art and its consumption, and into more audience-oriented forms, such as performance. She moved to Berlin in the early 1970s and made her first film in 1972. Her first feature-length film, *Madame X*, an odyssey of women pirates, appeared in 1977. Since then she has made *Ticket of no Return: Portrait of a Woman Drinker* (1979), *Freak Orlando* (1981) and *The Image of Dorian Gray in The Yellow Press* (1984). More recently, Ottinger has been involved in a two-part film project on China: a four-and-a-half hour documentary, *China, the Arts, Everyday Life*, made during a visit to China in 1985; and a full-length feature, *Joan of Arc of Mongolia*, currently in pre-production.

Ulrike Ottinger: The China film is the first part of a larger China project. It documents my first direct encounter with China – though of course it arises out of many years of theoretical preparation. I wanted first to gain experience of this other culture, a culture absolutely alien to our own, before writing the script for a second film – a full-length feature, which will also be shot in China.

For this first film, I chose a form that allowed me to represent unmediated perception and observation. I used what I called *camera-stylo*¹ – a method of noting and recording whatever seemed to me worthy of attention. I travelled everywhere with my camera on my shoulder, ready to film at any given moment. My Chinese guides, incidentally, seemed deeply disturbed by the notion of recording the outside world so directly – by my interest, not only in culture, but in the culture of their everyday lives.

The film is divided into three chapters. The first focuses on the city of Beijing, China's great, puritanical and spartan administrative centre. Everyday life on the streets of Beijing is quite different from our own European cities; even the sounds are different. I insisted absolutely throughout the trip on original sound – though I never reproduced sound in its original form. I used it in the same way as the film uses image. The film condenses its images, in the first

instance simply by virtue of what it selects. To condense the aural impact in the same way, I layered the sound, and worked a lot with music.

In making the film, I was influenced by Chinese nature-painting: by the use of the scroll, which not only demands a different method of painting, but a different way of viewing – rolling out the scroll, focusing in on details, wandering to and fro, viewing piecemeal. So if I was filming a market square, for example, I'd pan very slowly and steadily across the square, rather than trying to capture the image in toto. The same principle then extended to my use of the rhythms of sound and music. The Chinese language makes no distinction between dance and music; in other words, every movement and every dance is integral to music itself. So in the film, music is bound, not only to movement, but to language. Chinese is a tonal language, in which meaning changes according to pitch. For me, there was an extraordinary identity between the Chinese language, music and movement; and it's this I've tried to capture by using so much music in the film.

So much for the first chapter, on Beijing. In the second part of the film, I move on to Szechuan. Szechuan has none of the hard-edged spartanism of Beijing; it's a much more lively province, almost baroque. Szechuan is the richest province in China; it plays a hugely important role in the country. It is also the home of Taoism – a popular religion that contrasts sharply with what one might call the much more intellectualised religious form of Confucianism.

Finally, I move on to Yenan in the far South-West of China towards the Himalayas, along the border with Tibet and Burma. The provinces here are populated by a whole host of different minorities – and what I looked at specifically was on the one hand, the architecture and on the other, one of the minorities, the Bei, a mountain people living in the foothills of the Himalayas.

The film is concerned throughout with various different art forms – with the oldest of local operatic forms, for example, such as the Szechuan opera, which is much older than its Beijing counterpart. There are scenes from contemporary theatre and cinema – from the

¹ Literally, 'camera-pen', a concept first advanced by the French film director and critic Alexandre Astruc in the '40s.



A concern for art forms: *China, the Arts, Everyday Life*, 1985.

mobile cinemas that move from village to village. Generators have to be set up on the village squares, since there's often no electricity. The film ends, in fact, with a scene from a mobile cinema in a village square.

I'm now working on the second part of my China project. It's a feature film, for which I'm trying to raise interest among potential co-producers outside Germany. Plans for the feature were already underway before I made the documentary; the script is now available, and the film has been in pre-production for the past year. Like all my films, this one doesn't have a plot in the strict sense. It centres on four women, who are in very different ways representative of Western culture. They are, first, a German teacher, whose motives for travelling to China are educational. She carries a Baedeker guidebook, which tells her everything she needs to know in advance. Then there's a young girl with a rucksack, looking for adventure – she travels first class, and sleeps in the luggage rack; an English lady, who travels in a separate luxury carriage – the kind used around the turn of the century on the Trans-Siberian railway; and an American musical star.

The four meet on the Trans-Siberian railway, where they encounter a number of other figures whose role is to explain the nature of our Western culture. The dialogues that ensue on the train take the form of reflections on Western culture. So for example one of the figures, the star of a Yiddish-American musical, argues for the American musical to be seen as a combination of the highlights of the most diverse international musical cultures – as a combination of Oriental and Western influences. There's also a Russian officer, and a whole variety of other figures, each of whom addresses the audience in monologue form. The monologues in the film function as they do in opera, where each character sings an aria as a means of placing him or herself: 'This is who I am, this is the world I inhabit.'

The introductory section of the film not only opens up the question of how to understand Western culture; it also tells the story of the Trans-Siberian railway, as one of the vehicles that has transported Western culture into the wilderness of the Siberian tundra and taiga. The film looks at the opposition between what is culturally formed, and untamed nature – a nature whose threatening presence enters into the train



Viewing piecemeal: *China, the Arts, Everyday Life*, 1985.

via the stories the characters tell of the tundra wilderness.

This whole section will be shot in the studio, as a way of emphasising the artificiality of the culture it represents – our culture, film culture, Hollywood culture. The second part of the film will be absolutely distinct; it will be shot in the middle of the Gobi desert, where the train suddenly comes to a standstill.

In this second section, there begins what I see as an encounter between two absolutely distinct cultures. The film explores the misunderstandings and prejudices to which that encounter gives rise. It becomes a reflection – a playful reflection – on the nature of prejudice. The history it depicts is in part that of the semi-nomadic peoples of Mongolia. Those peoples still have storytellers who know the ancient epics of the nomads; the film will show what they still retain of ancient forms of dance and theatre, mass dances, ancient mystery plays from pre-lamaist days, from the era of pantheism. In a sense, and to distinguish it as sharply as possible from Part 1, this section will have something of a documentary character.

Mandy Merck: *The part of the China film you've shown looks very unlike the other films you've made. I wondered whether documentaries about China tend to dictate an appropriate style. It looks to me more like Antonioni's documentary on China² or Joris Ivens³ than Ulrike Ottinger's.*

I'd want to differentiate this film very clearly from other documentaries – in particular in terms of its cinematic gaze. The dialogue in which the camera engages is very different from that of either Ivens or Antonioni – as is the film's use of music, or its refusal of commentary. What's also important about this particular documentary is the way it functions for me as a sketchbook: reality collected together. What it represents is simply a different way of putting together a film script. My scripts are littered with all kinds of scribbles, newspaper cutting, visual messages, postcards, bits and pieces of words or colours, all of which I ultimately put together as a completed

² Chung Kuo, 1972.

³ The Dutch director who made the six-part documentary, *How Yukong Moved the Mountains*, 1976.

78 film. For me, the China documentary is a study that represents what I can convey, filmically, of my first direct confrontation with this other culture.

Annette Kuhn: *I'd like to ask about the context of production and sponsorship of your films. How would you situate yourself and your work in West German film culture now?*

Let's go back to the second part of the China project, the feature film. The script, as I've said, was submitted a year ago. The film seems to me to represent an attractive proposition, not least because the audiences will be substantial.⁴ But I'm having to fight extremely hard for funding. There have been a number of changes in Germany since our new Interior Minister was installed. His brief is to support the arts and culture; but he seems reluctant to do so, unless it serves the interests of his own political party, the CSU.⁵ Where film is concerned, all that interests him is the extent to which any film serves economic interests. He's most fond of a particularly mediocre form of entertainment film.

I certainly see my films as entertaining – but they entertain in intelligent ways.

What I'm saying is, first, that it has indeed become more difficult to produce features of this kind in Germany. It would of course be wrong to say it's ever been easy. But for me to produce a film of the kind I've described has become a virtual impossibility, in financial terms. (The China feature is scheduled to cost several million.)

I've always produced my films myself, and I intend to continue to do so – in the interest of the films themselves, of their subject matter, and the quality of the finished product. But what I now increasingly encounter is a whole range of mechanisms designed to suppress anything recognisable as *Autorenfilm*. Let me give a few very concrete examples. All my films to date have been scripted, directed and filmed exclusively by me. I also take responsibility for art direction.

⁴ *China, the Arts, Everyday Life* played to full houses in the Federal Republic.

⁵ The Christian Socialist Union, one of the two parties in the ruling conservative coalition.



The culture of everyday life: *China, the Arts, Everyday Life*, 1985.

The whole pre-production process may take anything up to two years – and I'm allotted the going rate for each separate job. Now, as a producer, I'm only permitted to be paid a given percentage of the total budget. On the one hand, 20 or 30 per cent of the capital invested in the film is mine; it takes the form of my own labour. On the other, in my role as producer (and this goes back to a very recent government ruling) my income is limited to a decreasing percentage of the total allotted. As author/film-maker, I find myself in a position where my own labour is never acknowledged for what it is – namely as the capital I invest in my films.

Kraft Wetzel: The problem is that most German film subsidy bodies require of the producer that s/he put up a certain initial percentage of the capital. For a number of years, that percentage has been fixed at 20 per cent. Certain funding bodies have now increased it.

As author/film-maker, Ulrike is obviously in no position to offer 20 per cent of the budget in cash. Instead, s/he writes it off against the fees she herself, as producer, has the right to pay herself for the various functions she fulfils: script, camera, art direction. Now obviously, someone like Ulrike Ottinger, who takes on all three functions, is relatively well off by comparison with most author/film-makers, who may perform no more than two functions at the production stage. So as long as her budget stays fairly low, she shouldn't have too much difficulty getting together 30 per cent of the budget, on paper at least. But the government is making life increasingly difficult for film-makers like Ulrike Ottinger, since they've recognised that they never pay themselves the money they allot to the different functions they perform. The State has now introduced fixed rates for each film-making function – and they're insisting that those rates are actually paid to a hired crew. What the government wants is for someone like Ulrike to become a 'proper' producer, by hiring a crew at the going rate.

If she refuses – if she continues to perform a variety of functions in the film-making process – she's penalised by being paid less than she would pay

a hired crew. She's being pressurised, in other words, to go to a 'proper' producer – who's actually allowed to pay her more than she can pay herself. The logic of the system is to squeeze film-makers out of business as producers.

That's certainly true. But there is another point that should perhaps be made. For me, the more fundamental problem is the way cinema is excluded from official culture. Film is seen predominantly from an exclusively financial viewpoint. It's assumed that it should somehow be able to support itself – while on the other hand, financial aid is still forthcoming for the steel industry, or for other industrial sectors.

Film never figures in the politicians' consciousness as part of official culture. Subsidies are assumed to be necessary for opera or theatre; the same can never be said of film. The problem is then compounded by the more general sense, in Germany and internationally, that the arts and culture – and I would include art theory here – are the things to be despised. We live in an era that's thoroughly fixated on immediate financial returns; we apply financial criteria to wholly inappropriate areas. Unfortunately, perhaps, for us as artists, the days of the great Renaissance and Baroque patrons are gone. The great and wealthy and powerful no longer look to artists as a source of ornament. Today's politicians are more likely to seek the company of tennis stars; it would never occur to them to appear with the likes of us in public.

The above is a transcription of a discussion with Ulrike Ottinger chaired by Annette Kuhn which took place at the London Institute of Contemporary Arts day conference, 'Which Way Now for German Cinema?', May 2, 1987. It was translated and edited by ICA Talks Organiser Erica Carter.

China, the Arts, Everyday Life, and all other films by Ulrike Ottinger, are available from Export Film Bischoff, 8000 München 2, Bayerstrasse 15, Federal Republic of Germany. Tel: 089-555516.

MADAME X OF THE CHINA SEAS

A STUDY OF ULRIKE OTTINGER'S FILM BY
PATRICIA WHITE

¹ See Teresa de Lauretis, 'Aesthetic and Feminist Theory: Rethinking Women's Cinema', *New German Critique* 34, Winter 1985, pp 154-175.

Madame X, a harsh, pitiless beauty, the cruel, uncrowned ruler of the China Seas, launched an appeal to all women willing to exchange an everyday existence of almost unbearable boredom, though safe and easy, for a world of uncertainty and danger, but also full of love and adventure.

THESE ARE THE FIRST WORDS of Ulrike Ottinger's lesbian pirate film, *Madame X: An Absolute Ruler*, before the credits, spoken over the exquisite image of the junk *Orlando's* figurehead, exact replica of the pirate queen (both played by co-producer and costume designer Tabea Blumenschein), shot against a deep blue sky. The promise sounds much like that of cinema itself – the guarantee of pleasure is the beautiful, cruel woman. Here, however, that woman speaks this contradictory, gender specific appeal. Feminism's promise to transform our everyday existence, too, is contradictory; it does not engage 'all women' in the same way or with the same agenda. Ottinger's film, in taking up the appeals of both cinema and feminism, both 'collective fantasies', both 'public spheres', addresses the spectator not only as *female* (a claim Teresa de Lauretis makes for women's films such as *Born in Flames* and *Jeanne Dielman*)¹, but also, I will try to demonstrate, as *marginal*.

Such a spectator might be 'willing' to agree with one of the film's characters: 'This is something – this is *extreme* – the *Outlaw* – the

Misfits – This is what I was looking for!’ exclaims Betty Brillo.² The excess encapsulated by her remark is not foreign to Ottinger’s cinema, is indeed its defining characteristic. Her films feature elaborate costumes, painterly shot composition, anti-realist performances, and eclectic and abundant musical and sound quotations. Ottinger manipulates a visual and aural ‘collage’ technique drawing on sources from the Shangri-La’s to Yma Sumac, Gustave Moreau to Man Ray, Oscar Wilde to Virginia Woolf to produce a feminist surrealism, or what might be called queer cinema. However, I wish to go beyond the notion that Ottinger’s style appeals to a marginal audience through some subcultural ‘sensitivity’ or ‘gay aesthetics’. Rather, instances such as *Madame X*’s invocation to her crew, a collage which overdetermines the figure of the pirate queen, and the test of the fool Belcampo’s gender identity function to foreground the *construction* of the film’s address.

² Ulrike Ottinger’s screenplay, *Madame X: Eine Absolute – Herrscherin*, Basel/Frankfurt, Stroemfeld/Roter Stern, 1979, contains not only narration of this kind, but a mass of material, both written and visual, relating to the film.

³ Teresa de Lauretis, *op cit*, p 163.



Orlando: Ottinger as *Madame X*’s lost lover, reading Virginia Woolf.

Teresa de Lauretis has recommended that we ‘re-think women’s cinema and aesthetic forms . . . in terms of address – who is making films for whom, who is looking and speaking, how, where, and to whom’, in the context of her claim that ‘feminism has not only invented new strategies of created new texts, but more importantly it has conceived a new social subject, women: as speakers, readers, spectators, users and makers of cultural forms, shapers of cultural processes.’³ *Madame X: An Absolute Ruler* was produced within and in reference to the current wave of feminism. It dramatises the relation of women as social subjects to woman as supported and produced by the cinematic apparatus. As yet another remake of the Hollywood *Madame X*, it acknowledges a long history of female spectatorship. The pirate genre provides the context for a feminist adventure in which social gender roles are transformed by role-playing and inversion, thematised as both sexual inversion and car-

⁴ Marc Silberman, 'Surreal Images: Interview with Ulrike Ottinger', *Jump Cut* 29, 1984, p. 56. See also Miriam Hansen, 'Visual Pleasure, Fetishism and the Problem of Feminine/Feminist Discourse: Ulrike Ottinger's *Ticket of No Return*', *New German Critique* 31, Winter 1984, pp. 95-108.

⁵ The voice-over remains unidentified; the call is delivered by Yvonne Rainer. Due to lack of space, I am unable to discuss the number and kinds of relationships the film posits between the woman's body and the woman's voice, without, however, granting her speech. See Kaja Silverman, 'Dis-Embodying the Female Voice', in Mary Ann Doane et al., eds, *Re-vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*, American Film Institute Monograph Series 3, Frederick, MD, University Publications of America, 1984, pp. 131-149.

⁶ Monique Wittig, 'Paradigm', in George Stambolian and Elaine Marks, eds, *Homosexualities and French Literature*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1979, p. 114.

nival. Ottinger's citations and disruptions of classical cinematic codes take women's visual pleasure, even fetishism, for granted, displacing the presumably masculine spectator. And, as I shall attempt to demonstrate through an analysis of the 'love scene', the film also reworks the relation of woman as image to the apparatus. Lesbianism foregrounds the difference of women from woman, insisting on spectatorial desire as well as identification. My final brief discussion of feminist film theory suggests that the impasse regarding female spectatorship is related to the blind spot of lesbianism.

The 'China Seas' upon which the junk *Orlando* sails is a thinly-disguised Lake Constance where Ottinger shot the film in 1977. It was funded by ZDF, German television, and the low budget is at least partially responsible for the innovative sound mixing. Ottinger continued to use post-sync sound, however, on her next, better-funded feature, *Bildnis einer Trinklerin* (*Ticket of No Return*, 1979). Many of the actresses in *Madame X* worked with Ottinger in later films, and film-makers Cynthia Beatt and Yvonne Rainer appear in the film. Criticised or ignored upon its release, Ottinger's first feature has a cult following and is beginning to be critically re-evaluated.⁴

The film's first movement is the collection of a motley crew of women from 'various nations and all walks of life' who join Madame X (mistress of 'satanic sea art') and her faithful servant Hoi-Sin on board the *Orlando*. The voice-over introduces each exemplary character, who receives the following message, delivered in German or English, often via an actual communication system (newspaper, analysis session, car telephone): 'Chinese Orlando - stop - to all women - stop - offer world - stop - full of gold - stop - love - stop - adventure at sea - stop - call Chinese Orlando - call Chinese Orlando - stop.'⁵ The telegram 'stops' insist on the danger of the proposition, the prohibition of the wish. Yet each character 'makes her decision and her judgment in a flash' and sets off for the ship. The community (of women) is constructed by the look of astonishment on the face of each woman when she reaches the ship. We are refused the reverse shot; the first image of the next woman in the chain stands in its place. The crew are summoned by a call 'to all women', but their consent implies something like Monique Wittig's definition of homosexuality: 'the desire for something else that is not connoted. This desire is resistance to the norm.'⁶

Each character is 'representative', overdetermined by costumes, names, activities, props and music. 'Flora Tannenbaum', German forestry expert and Goethe admirer, is seen breakfasting outdoors dressed in hunter's green. A dachshund delivers the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* in which she reads Madame X's message; she shoulders her rifle and marches off to military music. 'Blow-up', an Italian cover-girl, instructs her chauffeur to change direction as Satie's 'La Diva de l'empire' plays on the soundtrack. 'Betty Brillo' is disenchanted by 'all that American Hausfrauen-dream' and 'Noa-Noa', a native of Tai-Pi, has been rejected by her husband for infringing a taboo. Australian bush-pilot 'Omega

Centauri' would rather be an astronaut; 'Josephine de Collage', international artist on roller skates, is 'bored to death by the academic cultural round'; and psychology graduate 'Carla Freud-Goldmund' arrives at the ship in a rickshaw pulled by her Chinese analysand, as a heart beats on the soundtrack.

So the 'characters' are not realistic. Nor are they allegorical. They serve as so many figures in a *mise-en-scène* of female bodies which work through specific possibilities and scenarios of desire within the background fantasy of the pirate ship, the women's movement, lesbian utopia. Seduction, jealousy and mutiny culminate in the successive deaths of all but one, the 'primitive' Noa-Noa. Madame X herself 'survives', as does Belcampo, the hermaphroditic manicurist whom the crew rescue en route.

The classical fool aboard the Ship of Fools, Belcampo is subjected to a 'personality test', the object of which is the determination of his/her gender. 'The decision – a Man – would doubtless have meant being thrown overboard.' But Belcampo passes the test by 'jamming' the apparatus. (To Carla Freud-Goldmund's questions Belcampo replies with flash-forwards, flashbacks, and false fragments of the film. The sequence ends with aggression against the analyst, to the crew's cheers.) Then the women direct their course to the pleasure yacht *Holliday*, at the hands of whose 'unsubtle' crew Belcampo had suffered exactly that threatened fate. The women 'massacre' Lady Divine and the other pleasure-seekers on board the yacht to the soundtrack of a 'B' horror flick and divide the spoils.

In the film's final sequence the crew of the *Orlando* is reassembled onshore not by an explicit invocation but by the ritual of carnival. The women are resurrected, via costume change, as new versions of their former personae. The sadistic Carla Freud-Goldmund returns as a bike dyke in leather; Hoi-Sin, who had finally committed ritual suicide, comes back as the femme, 'Leader of the Pack' on the soundtrack. The imperialist Flora Tannenbaum now wears black face and jailbird stripes and sweeps the sidewalk. 'All the discontent within them was unified into one over-riding power and they set sail one day with a favorable wind behind.'

The staging of regeneration is, on one level, resonant of Woolf's *Orlando*, in which the eponymous hero/ine is both transsexual and trans-historical. A flashback presents the director herself as Madame X's lost lover Orlando, narcissistically reading Woolf's novel – the inscription of the author as 'Wunschbild der Vergangenheit' ('ideal of the past', to use Ottinger's term). On another level, the film's ending points to an indefinite number of possible re-visions. Put another way, *Madame X* recommends not the 'destruction of pleasure as a radical weapon' as Laura Mulvey proposed in 1975⁷, but the radical reconstruction of a number of possible cinematic pleasures for women. Teresa de Lauretis suggests:

Cinema could be made to re-present the play of contradictory percepts and

⁷ Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen* Autumn 1975, Vol 16 no 3, p 7.

⁸ Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1984, p 69.

⁹ See Natalie Zemon-Davis, 'Women on Top', in her *Society and Culture in Early Modern France*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1986, pp 124-152.

¹⁰ See Claire Johnston, 'Femininity and the Masquerade: *Anne of the Indies*', in Claire Johnston and Paul Willemen, eds, *Jacques Tourneur*, London, British Film Institute, 1975, pp 36-44. 'It is hardly surprising that [Tourneur] should have chosen a pirate film aimed at children's audiences to represent such an extraordinary masquerade, for children's literature is rich in bi-sexual phantasy', pp 37-8.

¹¹ Marc Silberman, 'Surreal Images', op cit, p 56.

meanings usually elided in representation, and so to enact the contradictions of women as social subjects, to perform the terms of the specific division of the female subject in language, in imaging, in the social.⁸

It is within such a problematic that I would like to situate Ottinger's film as an exemplary 're-make.' For not only does it simultaneously embrace and reject the terms of the cinematic production of femininity, it does so in reference to a specific Hollywood text – or rather set of texts, for *Madame X*, the melodrama of the unknown mother, was filmed in six Hollywood versions, spanning from the silent screen to the made-for-TV movie. She was played by Dorothy Donnelly (1916), Pauline Frederick (1920), Ruth Chatterton (1929), Gladys George (1937), Lana Turner (1966), and Tuesday Weld (1981). Feminist film theory has rhetorically proclaimed the historical absence of 'woman as woman' from Hollywood cinema (and even from cinema audiences). 'Madame X' can be seen as a synecdoche for the critical proposition of woman's absence from history, while insisting on her (almost uncanny) return. Ottinger articulates the contradictions of this representation with the social field of feminism, and 'meanings usually elided in representation' are central to this lesbian re-make of what must already be considered a fetish-text.

But it is not so much the maternal melodrama as the frame of the pirate film which allows Ottinger's *Madame X* to re-write gender within genre. The film is not merely an *inversion* of a dominant genre (although inversion may be its theme), for it enacts not 'women on top'⁹ but a homosocial world (including male homosexuality, represented by Belcampo and the Russian sailor he rescues). Women's exile is both utopian premise and cause for rebellion. From 'real' Chinese women pirates pictured in the screenplay, to *Anne of the Indies* and *La Fiancée du pirate*, two key texts in early feminist film culture¹⁰; from classical camp like *The Pirate and China Seas* to gay films such as Anger's *Fireworks*, Fassbinder's *Querelle*, Shroeter's *Weisse Reise*, and Ottinger's own short *Infatuation of the Blue Sailors*, the implication of ships and sexual identity has a connotatively rich cultural and cinematic lineage.

The freaks on board the *Orlando* (Ottinger takes up the theme in her 1981 feature *Freak Orlando*), whose photos are snapped by Lady Divine aboard her spectator-ship the *Holliday*, have affinities with the Ship of Fools as well as Hollywood. Ottinger sums up her method: 'I use traditional cinema's clichés for my own purposes.'¹¹ The pirate captain's prosthesis becomes the remarkable studded leather glove through which Madame X 'speaks'. Her dismembered right hand functions as a joke on castration, circulates in Belcampo's antics and is re-embodied later in the film. The conventional parrot appears here as a character, although a mute one.

The film cites Hollywood conventions yet ignores the construction of narrative space by dialogue and classical editing. This selective appropriation extends to the choice of genre. Critics have seen the strong



Madame X: pirate captain and figurehead, complete with phallic leather glove.

¹² Roswitha Mueller, 'Interview with Ulrike Ottinger', *Discourse* 4, Winter 1981/1982, p 120. Ottinger's sentiments are shared by Kaja Silverman who suggests that 'the sartorial reticence of North American feminism . . . is the symptom of what might almost be called "The Great Feminine Renunciation"' in 'Fragments of a Fashionable Discourse', in Tania Modleski, ed, *Studies in Entertainment*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1987, p 149.

¹³ Teresa de Lauretis, 'Aesthetic and Feminist Theory', op cit, p 159.

¹⁴ Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', op cit, p 18.

¹⁵ Claire Johnston, 'Women's Cinema as Counter Cinema,' in Claire Johnston, ed, *Notes on Women's Cinema*, London, SEFT, 1975, p 28.

generic expectations attached to certain films as enabling ideological rupture. Ottinger goes this critical claim one better, actually bringing to life signifiers of femininity repressed in the classical tradition (notably the ship's figurehead) with resounding implications for narrativity, closure and identification. The refusal of dialogue emphasises women's oppression, while the film incorporates quotations from Hollywood films, by synchronising snatches of music and sound effects with characters' gestures and with larger fragments of the film.

Discussing *Madame X's* reception, Ottinger commented: 'Some women have accused me of sexism and leather fetishism. I do not see it this way. I do not think women should now turn into grey mice.'¹² The question of what women *should* turn into touches on the theme of metamorphosis in the film as well as on de Lauretis's assertion that 'women's cinema has been engaged in the transformation of vision.'¹³ Laura Mulvey's claim that 'women . . . cannot view the decline of the traditional film form with anything much more than sentimental regret'¹⁴ is the only gaze specifically allocated to women in her classic essay. Drawing on classical cinema, Ottinger's *Madame X* exploits the radical potential of this 'sentimental regret', thereby taking up Claire Johnston's challenge: 'in order to counter our objectification in the cinema, our collective fantasies must be released: women's cinema must embody the working through of desire: such an objective demands the use of the entertainment film.'¹⁵

Character positions within the film are used to establish not only the geography of the junk, but also narrative space itself. Madame X's point of view is established as a high-angle shot. Hoi-Sin is depicted in the background to the side of her mistress; in close-up she looks left. The figurehead is shot in low-angle profile. Noa-Noa takes up the figurehead's position twice, gesturing and pointing towards Belcampo's raft and later towards the yacht. Her identification with the figurehead is one indication of how 'woman' as guarantor of cinema is distributed across a number of positions in this film with its plethora of female characters, each connoting, in her own way, 'to-be-looked-at-ness'.

Taking up these already established character positions, the film's love scene makes use of conventional filmic construction to represent the unrepresentable. The following analysis will help to demonstrate how the cinematic apparatus is made strange in order to 'embody the working through of desire'.

The women find Madame X's gaze intolerable and draw lots to determine who will attempt to appease her. Noa-Noa loses (wins?). Here is the shot breakdown of the seduction:

1

Madame X, wearing a huge hat decorated with mirrors, in low angle, medium close up (the same as an earlier shot which denotes her unapproachability); a lion on soundtrack.

- 2 Noa-Noa in high angle, long shot, wearing 'ritual headdress'; arranges and dances within a circle of leeks; drum music.
- 3 Madame X as in shot 1, glove drawn back defensively silent.
- 4 Noa-Noa as in shot 2; drums beat faster.
- 5 Jump cut to Noa-Noa, long shot, bearing tray of 'exotic fruits' climbs steps towards camera; plucked strings and percussion instruments.
- 6 Hoi-Sin in close-up, shielded behind mast; looks left; percussion continues.
- 7 Noa-Noa creeps up to Madame X's feet in medium shot; camera reframes to include Madame X's face; she thrusts her glove several times at Noa-Noa who cowers but timidly persists, standing to offer Madame X a cauliflower; the movements of the glove are accompanied by roars, grunts, and growls; no music.
- 8 Hoi-Sin as in shot 6; raises her eyebrows as growls become more frequent, softer.
- 9 Madame X and Noa-Noa as in shot 7; Madame X accepts a bunch of bananas from Noa-Noa and sits at her side; camera reframes as Noa-Noa makes more offerings; silent until end of shot, Polynesian music fades in.
- 10 Hoi-Sin as in shot 8; narrows eyes, pinches lips, does an exaggerated double take; music continues.
- 11 Madame X's extended silver-heeled foot, medium shot; camera tilts up her leg; she pulls Noa-Noa toward her by her shell necklace; camera reframes to include their faces; they caress each other tentatively; camera tilts down to Noa-Noa's hand on Madame X's leg; music continues.
- 12 Hoi-Sin as in shot 10; blinks, rolls eyes, and looks away; music continues.
- 13 Madame X and Noa-Noa as in shot 11; Madame X runs her studded glove through Noa-Noa's hair, they continue to caress each other awkwardly; loud purring, music continues.

- 14 Hoi-Sin as in shot 12; looks down sadly; music continues.
- 15 Madame X and Noa-Noa as in shot 13, camera moves to frame Madame X's pump and Noa-Noa's bare feet as Noa-Noa runs her hand down Madame X's leg; music fades, loud purring.
- 16 Madame X framed against sky as in shot 1, claps once; no music.

With the exception of the jump cut in shot 5, the editing is classical. And although the mast logically obstructs Hoi-Sin's gaze at the lovers, the point of view construction is naturalistic in effect. The scene takes place in pantomime; the decisive action occurs on the soundtrack as the roars and growls dubbed to Madame X's thrusts and parries are tamed to the purring of a kitten. The mixing of musical themes in Hollywood romance is parodied. Noa-Noa's charms are associated here and during her subsequent flirtation with *Blow-up* with Polynesian music; and purring returns as the couple's theme. Exaggerated make-up and mugging, absurd fetishes (the long, thin chains Noa-Noa wears from her waist to her wrists, vegetables, and purring), contrasts between hat and head-dress, leather and grass skirt, and replacement of explicitness by the eroticism of texture and sound combine as hilarious musical comedy reworked to suit a love triangle among women. The humour of the off-screen growls which prick our curiosity as we watch the watcher, as well as adherence to the one-foot-on-the-ground rule suggest the pleasurable effects of Hollywood censorship. The refusal of the kiss (denied Belcam-po and the sailor as well) simulates suspense, yet goes further to indicate



Noa Noa: the stereotypical primitive, the survivor, the 'girl'.

the ultimate incompatibility of the apparatus with the representation of homosexuality.

The crew, said to represent 'women from all walks of life', are actually highly coded cinematic stereotypes. A consideration of Noa-Noa as 'woman of colour', or of the exoticism of Hoi-Sin, Madame X and the venture itself, must attend to this insistence on the stereotype. Noa-Noa is the object of desire in this love story. She is presented as spectacle differently from the others. Her breasts are bare and her dance is performed for Madame X's gaze. Her primitivism is emphasised by her interest in the pirate queen's metallic ornaments and by her selection of a huge tortoise in the division of the booty from the *Holliday*. She expresses herself entirely through pantomime.

Structurally, too, Noa-Noa is set off from the other women; drawing last in the otherwise silent lottery scene, her timid approach is accompanied by music. She is the last to join the crew, approaching the ship alone in her canoe. Like Belcampo, she comes from the sea. Most importantly, she survives the journey, and with Madame X and Belcampo assembles the resurrected crew at the end. Her privileged position is assumed at the expense of Hoi-Sin, who was 'in place' at the beginning of the journey. It is suggested that the women encoded as non-white survive one cycle of the Ship of Fools' passage as Madame X's servant/lover. Hoi-Sin is an 'ordinary' crew member in the next round. Perhaps next time the character in black face will take Noa-Noa's place?

Thus relations of domination are explicitly thematised and erotically invested. Madame X, as 'oriental despot', is more powerful than Hoi-Sin as Chinese cook. Ottinger's orientalism is at the same time 'Germanic', an appropriation of the (generally male homosexual) traditions of aestheticism and decadence for lesbian representation, and a provocative masquerade. She allows the feminine, the ornate and the East to be aligned, impenetrable and parodic, yet pleasurably textured. The 'primitive' represented by Noa-Noa deploys a different set of imperialist codes. Her specificity, in contrast to the relative interchangeability of the other women, can also be understood in terms of the production of difference within other, more conventionally narrative lesbian texts.¹⁶ Noa-Noa is the film's major concession to narrativity itself. With the exception of the victimised Russian sailor whose similar position as object of desire should not be overlooked, the entire cast is coded feminine. Noa-Noa, however, is the 'girl'.

Because Blow-up is presented as a spectacle of Hollywood femininity coded 'cultural' in contrast to Noa-Noa as 'natural' beauty, the romance between the blonde, glamorous diva and the 'exotic' is in some sense transgressive. Blow-up will later direct her third attempt at mutiny against the ship's figurehead, displacing the struggle with the terms of her imaging from the heroine to the image-making machine, reciprocally made in woman's image. Blow-up trips a mechanism and is strangled by the *imago*; her body is taken up in the arms of Omega Centauri who, quite literally, longs for the stars. In turn, Omega is killed

¹⁶ Butch/femme or marked differences in age and experience structure lesbian films from *Daughters of Darkness* to *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant*. Jackie Stacey's 'Desperately Seeking Difference,' *Screen*, Winter 1987, vol 28 no 1, pp 48-61, discusses the narrative implications of one woman's identification with and desire for another in *All About Eve* and *Desperately Seeking Susan*.

for having discovered the switch that animates the figurehead, exposing the apparatus.

Madame X's identification with this animated figurehead puts cinema on the side of women's self-presentation; the apparatus does not merely secure an image of woman as 'not-man'. An exact replica of Madame X, the figurehead fits the image, produces the illusion perfectly. The image (woman) animates the mechanised, or enchanted, leather-clad female body which stands in for the apparatus (the title of the film appears across the first image of the figurehead). For the figurehead itself is given as image of woman 'made to speak', reciting 'Gold, Liebe, Abenteuer' when Madame X wishes to give 'convincing proof of her absolute power and authority'. It is both the pirate queen's narcissistic projection (the double *à la* Dorian Gray, a figure Ottinger later returned to in *The Image of Dorian Gray in the Yellow Press*, 1984), and a fantasmatic representation of her omnipotence which crushes Blow-up's rebellion.



Yet the fact that the figurehead in turn produces Madame X in its own image prevents any simple reading of women's reappropriation of the means of representing 'woman'. Madame X's robotic movements and mechanical sounds indicate that she is not altogether human: her severed hand is restored like a spare part. The synchronisation of sound effects associates her body with the register of sound mixing. One in particular refers unmistakably to the MGM lion, whose roar authorised the unfolding of decades of Hollywood stories. Finally, Madame X's gaze is one of the major organising principles of the film.

The figurehead is the conventional female emblem of piracy, and of

sailing in general, gendering the ship itself. It is significant to *Madame X*'s narrative structure that the translation from male genre to female utopia maintains this marking of the journey. On the one hand the film's 'moral' can be read off, as Ottinger suggests in interviews, as the inability of the women's movement to do away with 'figureheads' of power: on the other, 'power' itself is granted the various affirmative connotations it has within contemporary lesbian feminism. As an antidote to 'Mister X', the anonymous yet coherent 'invisible guest' of classical cinema, Madame X herself is split between the conditions of production of her femininity. The pirate queen is caught between her projected image (the figurehead) and the film which takes her name. She is no more than a *figurehead* of absolute authority, for 'Madame' brings the 'X' into an uneasy relation with patriarchal naming.

In saying that a film whose visual and symbolic space is organized in this manner addresses its spectator as a woman, regardless of the gender of its viewers, I mean that the film defines all points of identification (with character, image, camera) as female, feminine or feminist. However, this is not as simple or self-evident a notion as the established film-theoretical view of cinematic identification, namely, that identification with the look is masculine and identification with the image is feminine. It is not self-evident precisely because such a view . . . is now accepted: that the camera (technology), the look (voyeurism), and the scopic drive itself partake of the phallic and thus somehow are entities or figures of a masculine nature.¹⁷

What might indeed be self-evident in this context is that any elaboration of *lesbian* spectatorship must displace the 'established film-theoretical view'. Ottinger's text allows us to do this in the direction of de Lauretis's re-vision.

The figure of Belcampo offers a condensation of the film's address to the marginal subject. For if the crew respond 'naturally' *as women* to Madame X's call (recognising themselves in the address and their desire in the promise), the interpellation of Belcampo, as unnatural 'woman', is more problematic. Classically, the fool's discourse frustrates sexual identification. In the 'personality test' sequence, two discursive models are opposed: psychoanalysis and its imposition of order (represented by Carla Freud-Goldmund who administers the test), and carnival as ritualised disorder. Psychoanalysis's negotiation of sexual difference is staged, and Belcampo negotiates for his/her life on the stakes of femininity itself. It is important to realise, however, that Belcampo's sexual indeterminacy is not posited as some post-gendered answer to patriarchal oppression.¹⁸ Belcampo is accepted as a 'woman' by the onlooking crew at the end of the sequence; moreover, the question of his/her suitability to the enterprise is resolved by their approval. Belcampo's 'case' attempts to make sense of the non-sense of gender. S/he makes explicit the film's trope of female impersonation that might be considered germane to lesbian identity. Finally, 'his' romance with the Russian sailor, whom 'he' rescues and attempts to shield from Madame

¹⁷ Teresa de Lauretis, 'Aesthetic and Feminist Theory', *op cit*, p 161.

¹⁸ Such a utopian idea, Ottinger implies, would be premature for feminism.

X's wrath, introduces yet another 'invert' trajectory to the lesbian narrative, hinting at the alliance between gay men and lesbians which Ottinger's representational strategies reflect.

The test sequence opposes a 'realistic' *mise-en-scène*, in which Carla quizzes Belcampo and times his/her answers with a stop-watch, to extra-diegetic images and sounds which Belcampo enunciates. A third 'space' is represented by the reaction shots of the other characters which dominate the end of the sequence.

Belcampo's first 'answer', given as flashback, is in response to the question: 'Are you an important personality?' We see the exact *reverse* of the shot immediately preceding Belcampo's rescue, where the women were represented as 'eating' a meal prepared by Hoi-Sin with a close-up of a large fish violently attacked by chopsticks, as seagulls screeched on the soundtrack. This time the fish is reconstituted. The jangle of a tam-bourine marks the beginning of this shot, which is followed by a detail of Carla clicking her stop-watch. Belcampo's carnival defies the linear unfolding of the film and the logic of question and answer, fleshing out the film's fantasy of regeneration as enacted in the final scene. The trick shot foregrounds the apparatus. Attempting inversion among the inverts, Belcampo draws Madame X herself into his/her discourse, breaking down the established hierarchy, if only momentarily. Carla asks if Belcampo feels strongly attracted to members of his/her own sex: s/he is literally unable to comprehend the question. Carla repeats it and we see, instead of Belcampo, Madame X throwing back her head with a resounding lip-synched laugh. Our understanding of the question coincides with hers in the only appropriate answer – defiant but affirmative laughter. As Blow-up and Betty Brillo caress each other in the following shot, gazing seductively at the camera, Carla asks in voice-over: 'Have you always wanted to be a woman?' Although her question seems to decide the very issue the test is designed to resolve, assuming the 'you' addressed is not already a woman, the connoted desire for 'resistance to the norm' (implying both the advantages of being a woman and the option of refusing to become woman) is unmistakable here as in the film as a whole.

Three questions bear directly on spectatorship. Carla asks Belcampo, 'Do you see around you things, or creatures of fable, that others do not see?' The 'response' is an image of Madame X, as if standing in for the film, a fabulous hallucination. Later in the sequence Belcampo is asked whether s/he enjoys adventure stories. This prompts Belcampo to transgress the spatial boundary set up even in this 'transgressive' sequence. S/he leaves the analytic space for the 'outside world' (the diegetic spectators' realm) and takes Omega Centauri's water pistol, returning to squirt the analyst. We are reminded of Mulvey's description: 'In contrast to woman as icon, the active male figure... demands a three-dimensional space. . . . He is a figure in a landscape.'¹⁹ The conventions of spectatorship again inform Carla's last question: 'Do you like to see love scenes at the movies?' At this point both Carla and Belcampo lose

¹⁹ Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *op cit*, pp 12-13.

discursive agency (Carla's mouth is taped shut) and we see a rapid montage of the crew participating in general disorder. On the soundtrack Betty Brillo sings the words from her opening speech as the film's romantic theme: 'Jesus, Babyfolks! This is *extreme*. . . ' The preferred response to Carla's question is '*this* is what I was looking for!'

Mary Russo, in her article on carnival (of) theory, cautions: 'In liminal states . . . temporary loss of boundaries tends to redefine social frames, and such topsy-turvy or time-out is inevitably set right and on course.'²⁰ Within the social frame of Madame X's 'absolute authority', however, setting right and 'on course' means continuing the women's journey with the figurehead in the bow. Having rescued the damsel in distress, the women direct the junk 'south-south-west' (the figurehead mouths the words) to revenge 'her' injustice. Carnival is recovered for the marginal. Belcampo's 'sexual difference' is not a simple critique of the rigidity of gender, but serves to shift the terms of its elaboration within the course of the lesbian adventure tale.

Here is the film's invocation once more:

Madame X, a harsh, pitiless beauty, the cruel uncrowned ruler of the China Seas, launched an appeal to all women willing to exchange an everyday existence of almost unbearable boredom, though safe and easy, for a world of uncertainty and danger, but also full of love and adventure.

To what degree does *Madame X* the film offer to spectators the booty promised by Madame X to all willing women? Isn't there a contradiction in the fact that a film which purports to call on all women is excessively long, 'boring', has no synchronous dialogue, too many heroines and a 'hero' in drag? One can certainly refuse to take part in what Ottinger has described as the film's 'initiation stories'; one might regard 'a comedy about the women's movement' as unfunny.²¹ As an all-too-willing spectator, I believe I have struck gold.

Feminist film theory has argued that if 'cinematic codes create a gaze, a world, and an object, thereby producing an illusion cut to the measure of desire'²², female spectators pledge themselves at their own risk, for very uncertain pleasures. *Madame X*, which posits a female gaze ('Madame X's gaze was so fearsome that the women trembled'), a female world (of playfully evoked erotic domination and submission), and a female object (like 'mainstream' cinema, Ottinger's film attaches desire to women's gaze at woman), is a dangerous enterprise. 'Love' is certainly on offer at the movies, is even considered a specific (albeit masochistic) appeal to the women in the audience. Yet 'love' is tied into a very precise ideological project concerned with endlessly reproducing the heterosexual couple. Women enjoy 'adventure' films surreptitiously, wearing, to quote another of Mulvey's tailor-made metaphors, 'borrowed transvestite clothes'.²³ Both assumptions – the impossibility of the female spectator's desire on the one hand; her 'trans-sex identification' on the other, have left lesbians in the dark.

²⁰ Mary Russo, 'Female Grotesques: Carnival and Theory', in Teresa de Lauretis, ed., *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1986, p 215.

²¹ Roswitha Mueller, 'Interview with Ulrike Ottinger', op cit, p 121. 'This, if you wish, is also my feminist point of view, the freedom for women to go out and experience on their own. This freedom, of course, also includes the possibility to fail. These ideas are contained in the notion of adventure of freedom, the freedom to try out things, and the freedom to fail.'

²² Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', op cit, pp 12-13.

²³ Laura Mulvey, 'Afterthoughts on "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" Inspired by *Duel in the Sun*', *Framework* 15/ 16/17, 1981, p 15.

²⁴ *ibid* p 12.

²⁵ Mary Ann Doane, 'Caught and Rebecca: The Inscription of Femininity as Absence', *Enclitic*, vol 5 no 2/vol 6 no 1, Fall 1981/Spring 1982, p 76.

²⁶ Miriam Hansen has also discussed this choice of metaphor; see her 'Pleasure, Ambivalence, Identification: Valentino and Female Spectatorship', *Cinema Journal*, vol 25 no 4, Summer 1986, p 8. Jackie Stacey, *op cit*, addresses a similar omission in feminist film theory: 'While this issue [of the woman spectator's pleasure] has hardly been addressed, the specifically homosexual pleasures of female spectatorship have been ignored completely', p 48.

²⁷ Laura Mulvey, 'Afterthoughts', *op cit*, p 12.

²⁸ *ibid*, p 13.

²⁹ Mary Ann Doane, 'Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator', *Screen*, September-October 1982, vol 23 no 3-4, pp 74-87.

³⁰ *ibid*, p 81.

In her 1981 'Afterthoughts' Laura Mulvey returned to 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' to face up to the female spectator. 'Narrative cinema' was re-evaluated in the light of the author's 'own love of Hollywood melodrama'²⁴, but 'visual pleasure' remained unaddressed. Mary Ann Doane would write that same year: 'One assumption behind the positing of a female spectator (that is, one who does not assume a masculine position with respect to the reflected image of her own body) is that it is no longer necessary to invest the look with desire in quite the same way.'²⁵ Assuming that it is necessary to 'posit' the female spectator differently, I would like to redress this disavowal of female fetishism through a brief discussion of the implications of the figure of the transvestite.²⁶

Mulvey describes her earlier position: 'at the time, I was interested in the... "masculinisation" of the spectator position regardless of the actual sex (or possible deviance) of any real live movie-goer.'²⁷ Lesbianism, although nowhere mentioned explicitly, would seem to coincide so exactly with 'masculinisation' in these arguments as to constitute an *impossible* deviance. In any case, it is *not* 'deviance' but 'actual sex' to which Mulvey returns in the figure of the transvestite. She writes: 'as desire is given cultural materiality in a text, for women (from childhood onwards) trans-sex identification is a *habit* that very easily becomes *second Nature*. However, this Nature does not sit easily and shifts restlessly in its borrowed transvestite clothes.'²⁸ This nature, secondary or not (as indeed the little girl's heterosexuality can be said to be *second nature* in the Freudian account upon which Mulvey draws), sounds suspiciously essentialist. For why must *transvestite* clothes be 'borrowed'? This process would be more accurately described as masquerade, a metaphor Doane opposes to transvestism in her essay 'Film and the Masquerade'.²⁹ It is the question of desire which leaves her restless with Mulvey's use of the term.

Doane argues that 'the transvestite wears clothes which signify a different sexuality, a sexuality which, for the woman, allows a mastery over the image and the very possibility of attaching the gaze to desire.'³⁰ Yet the 'different sexuality' in question is evidently not homosexuality. In fact, the 'very possibility' of *any* desire of one's own is eradicated by the next sentence: 'Clothes make the man, as they say.' Doane dismisses this supposedly facile 'masculinisation': 'sexual mobility would seem to be a distinguishing feature of femininity in its cultural construction. Hence, transvestism would be fully recuperable.' Lesbians must take issue with this assumption of mobility which, if true at all, has only been made possible by feminist mobilisation. Transvestism, unlike the masquerade, is not a psychoanalytic concept. Yet nor does their use of the term imply the social practice of transvestism, which clearly does not 'make the man'. The 'metaphor' seems to be a thinly-veiled reference to an impossible, reprehensible, or at best recuperable deviance on the part of the female spectator. Masquerade is to be considered as less 'recuperable [than] transvestism precisely because it constitutes an acknowledged-

ment that it is femininity itself which is constructed as mask – as the decorative layer which conceals a non-identity.³¹ But the false opposition between masquerade and transvestism impoverishes even the ‘straight’ story, discovering a new essential femininity in the ‘non-identity’ behind the mask, defined as nothing more than a screen for male desire.

Masquerade (as ‘hyperbolisation of the accountrements of femininity’³²) and symptomatic transvestism are of course not irrelevant to the consideration of women and cinema. Nor to Ottinger’s film, which draws on the genre loosely termed ‘spectacle’, specifically de Mille’s *Madam Satan* in which a costume party aboard a blimp ends in disaster. These figures for spectatorship beg the question of the ‘real live movie-goer’ and her visual pleasure. As Ottinger’s characters ‘lay aside their petticoats to try their luck at new trouser roles’³³, they become figures of spectatorial desire. And if Belcampo (who is of course not an hermaphrodite but a male transvestite) permits ‘trans-sex identification’ in ‘his’ adventure story, ‘deviance’ is made explicit.

Doane writes, ‘It is quite tempting to foreclose entirely the possibility of female spectatorship. . . .’³⁴ I would suggest that we succumb to other temptations. We can continue to gaze ‘with sentimental regret’ at the classical Hollywood construction of femininity without becoming ‘grey mice’. My reading of *Madame X: An Absolute Ruler* argues that the film’s address displaces two assumptions – that feminism finds its audience ‘naturally’, and that the female spectator is destined to miss the boat. Gold, love and adventure lie just beyond the horizon.

³¹ *ibid.*, p 82.

³² *ibid.*

³³ *Hosenrollen.* See Ulrike Ottinger, *Madame X: Eine Absolute Herrscherin*, op cit, p 4.

³⁴ Mary Ann Doane, ‘Film and the Masquerade’, op cit, p 87.

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MATILDE LANDETA

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE WORK OF A PIONEER MEXICAN FILM-MAKER BY CARMEN HUACO-NUZUM

¹ Marcela Fernandez Violante, unpublished abstract, *La Otra Cara de la Historia del Cine*, Mexico City, November 27, 1986, pp 1-6. These women paved the way for others such as Marcela Fernandez Violante herself, Maria Novarro, Maryse Sistach and Adriana Contreras.

² *ibid*, pp 1-6.

³ *ibid*, pp 1-2.

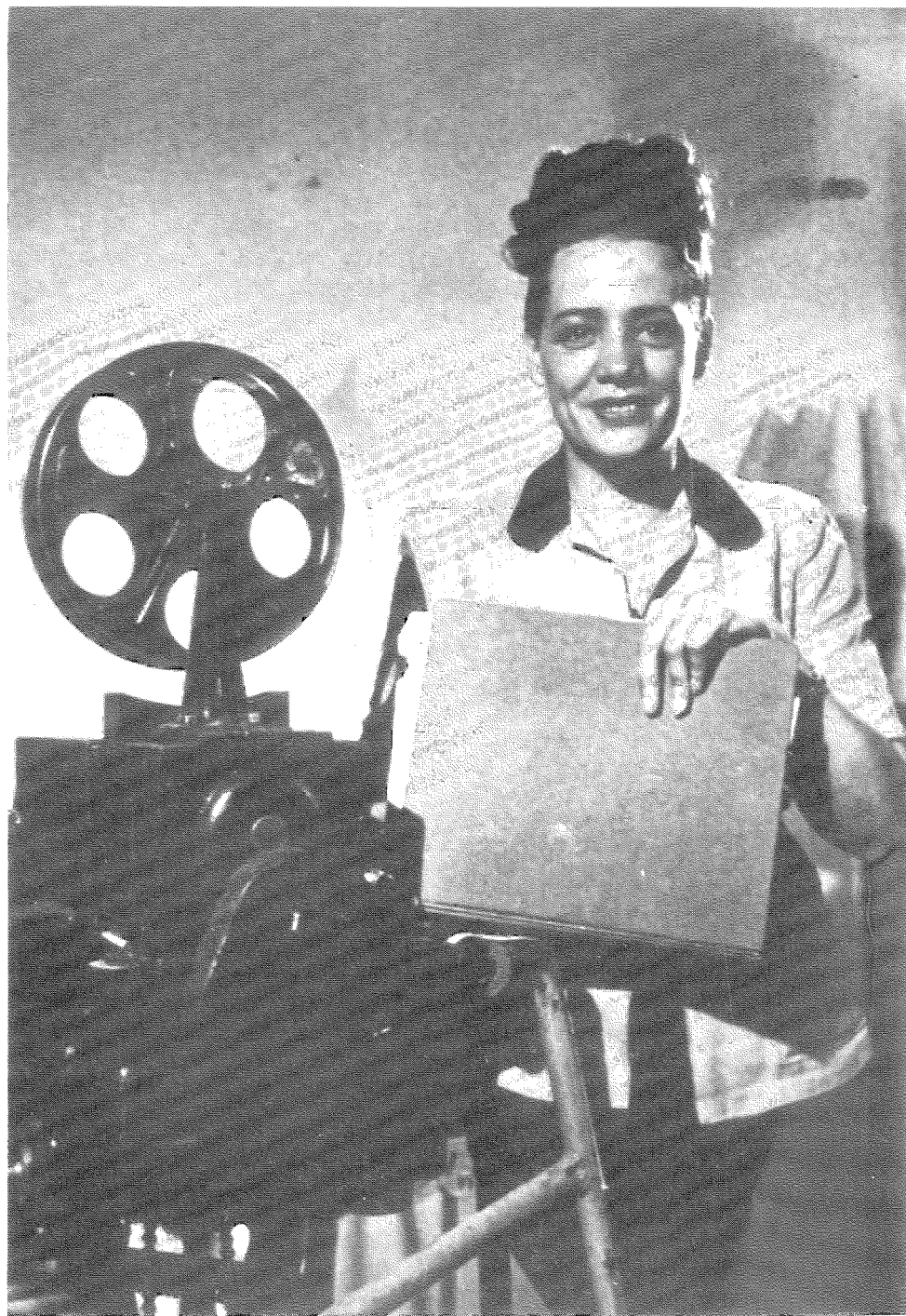
⁴ *ibid*, p 2.

AMONG THE PIONEER WOMEN film-makers of Mexico, the names of Mimi Derba, Adela Sequeyro 'Perlita' and Matilde Landeta are most prominent, together with directors like Eva Limiñana and Carmen Toscano.¹ The commonality that these extraordinary figures shared was their courage in confronting the established patriarchal industry, which in one way or another managed to sabotage most attempts by women to succeed as film directors. The story that links them together is one of adversity and hardship: these highly creative women often worked as actresses, screen writers and producers in order to help finance their films. It was not uncommon for them to discover that their scripts had been appropriated through underhand manipulation, or to find themselves forced to sell distribution rights in order to pay production debts.²

This article will sketch a condensed history of the cinema career of Matilde Landeta, derived from an interview with her in December 1986 at the Latin American Film Festival in Havana, Cuba. I will also focus on an analysis of her second film, *La Negra Angustias*. But first, I would like to touch briefly on other Latina pioneer cineastes mentioned, in the hope of providing a glimpse into the film careers of some of these remarkable women.

In 1917 Mimi Derba, a character actress in Mexican cinema, formed the Azteca Film company with a partner, Enrique Rosas, who was later to become prominent within the film industry.³ Of the seventeen films made in the country that year, six were produced by Azteca Film and three of these were written by Derba. She also directed and produced her only film, *La Tigresa* (The Tigress, 1917). The following year, Azteca Film went out of business and Derba fell into obscurity until her reappearance in 1931 with the advent of the first Mexican talking picture *Santa* (Saint), in which she played a secondary role.⁴

Adela Sequeyro 'Perlita' was born in Vera Cruz in 1901. In 1923, she began her career as an actress in the Mexican cinema, and in 1933 secured a leading role in the film *El Prisionero Numero Trece* (Prisoner Number Thirteen), directed by Fernando de Fuentes. In 1935, Sequeyro



'This is my world and here I stay': director Matilde Landeta.

⁵ *ibid*, p 3.

⁶ *ibid*, pp 3-4.

⁷ *ibid*, p 2.

⁸ *ibid*, p 2.

⁹ *ibid*, p 1.

¹⁰ Interview with Matilde Landeta, Havana, Cuba, December 1986, by Carmen Huaco-Nuzum (Julianne Burton also participated).

formed a film cooperative with other industry technicians which produced the first film written by her, *Mas Alla de la Muerte* (Beyond Death).⁵ After conflict among the cooperative members, Sequeyro left, set up another cooperative, Carola, and initiated her short-lived career as a director. For *La Mujer de Nadie* (Nobody's Woman, 1937), Sequeyro wrote the screenplay, produced, directed and acted in the film. In 1939, her second film, *Diablillos del Arrabal* (Slum Devils), suffered a devastating financial loss when the backers of the film, who had previously bought the rights of public distribution, broke their contract leaving Sequeyro without the financial means to pay outstanding production debts. After numerous failed attempts to reinstate herself as a director, she retired in 1943.⁶

Eva Limiñana, a Chilean national who immigrated to Mexico City in 1933, initiated her film career by writing a screenplay for *La Sangre Manda* (The Blood Dictates), directed by her husband Jose Bohr. After the two parted, Limiñana remained in Mexico, where in 1942, she produced, wrote and directed her first film, *Mi Lupe y mi Caballo* (My Lupe and My Horse). Unable to cover the cost of production the film had to be interrupted and its release halted for two years. Limiñana was never able to recover her losses and, soon thereafter, retired from films.⁷

Carmen Toscano was born in Mexico City in 1910. Prior to her film debut as director, she wrote extensively for Mexican television. In 1950, she directed her first film, *Memorias de un Mejicano* (Memories of a Mexican), a documentary based on the Mexican revolution of 1910 to 1917. In 1977 Toscano, in collaboration with Matilde Landeta, wrote a screenplay for her second film *Ronda Revolucionaria* (Revolutionary Watch), which was never completed due to her fragile health.⁸

(It is interesting to note that, since the beginning of the Mexican talkies in 1931, out of an estimated 3,200 films, only fifteen have been directed by women.⁹)

Matilde (Soto Conde) Landeta was born in Mexico City in 1913 to an upper middle-class family during a period of revolution and social unrest. Orphaned at the age of three, Landeta lived with her grandmother in San Luis Potosi, where she attended a Catholic girls' school. In 1928, the family moved to Mexico City after the closure of Catholic schools by the government. At about the age of twenty, Landeta was introduced to the cinema by her brother Eduardo, who in 1932 began his career as an actor in Mexican films. 'One day I went to visit my brother, I looked around and thought – this is my world and here I stay. They asked me what I would like to do in films. I quickly responded, direct.'¹⁰

In 1933, Paul Castelain, a North American who was collaborating on the film *El Prisionero Numero Trece*, gave Landeta the opportunity to work as a script-girl. At first, Landeta's family reacted vehemently against her association with the film industry, which carried a social stigma for women.

It took years to convince them that it was alright and proper for women to work in this field, and when they saw how well respected I was by my male colleagues, they accepted my work. In addition to my brother's support, I married a colonel in the revolutionary army who was amused by the idea that his wife worked in the movies, and often came along with me on the shoots.¹¹

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ *ibid.*

For the next eleven years, Landeta continued to work in that capacity, becoming the best known and best paid script-girl in the Mexican industry. She fought for promotion to Assistant Director, a position to which her years of experience entitled her and which was denied her solely on grounds of sex. But finally, in 1947, Landeta won her struggle over great opposition from the Directors' Association and subsequently managed to co-assist with some of the best known Mexican directors of the time; Emilio 'El Indio' Fernandez, Julio Bracho and Roberto Gavaldon.¹²

Landeta's presence in the film industry was, at best, tolerated although she was often employed in the capacity of consultant and technical adviser to fledgling male directors. Aware of the limitations imposed upon her by the industry because of her sex, she set out in 1947 to form an independent film company with her brother, *Técnicos Y Actores Cinematográficos Asociados (TACMA)*.¹³

That year Landeta wrote a screenplay about abandoned children in Mexico City entitled *Tribunal para Menores* (Juvenile Court), with the intention of directing it as her first film, but decided to postpone it when Vittorio De Sica's *Shoeshine* (1946), and later, *The Bicycle Thief* (1948), appeared in theatres throughout Mexico. In 1950, the screenplay caught the interest of producers. However, that same year, Luis Buñuel released *Los Olvidados*. It was not until 1953 that Landeta once again sought financing from the National Cinematographic Bank for this screenplay, only to be manipulated by the director of the bank, Eduardo Garduño, into selling her copyright on the understanding that she would direct the film.¹⁴ While on location in Durango, as a consultant for the North American film *Comanche*, Landeta read a newspaper report that a young male director, Alfonso Corona Blake, had been assigned to direct her screenplay. Upon her return to Mexico City, she strenuously protested, demanding her right to direct the film; instead, the doors of the industry closed on her for the next six years.

(From 1956 to 1962, Landeta was ostracised for having violated the code of feminine behaviour, and as a result of her confrontation with Eduardo Garduño, she was barred from the industry and unable to find work in any capacity within the system. Ironically, in 1956, she won an 'Ariel' – equivalent to the Academy Award – for best screenplay for Corona Blake's film, which by then had been retitled *El Camino de la Vida*, The Road of Life. With no jobs available to her in the Mexican film industry, Landeta went to the United States to work on a Disney film, *The White Stallion*; later she acquired and managed a theatre in Tlapan and maintained her membership of unions and film

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ *Criolla* is the term used for a white woman of European descent born in Latin America.

¹⁷ Emilio Garcia Riera, *Historia Documental del Cine Mexicano*, vol III, 1945-1948, Mexico City, Ediciones Era, 1971, pp 290-291.

¹⁸ Landeta filmed it in three weeks as opposed to the usual length of time allotted.

¹⁹ While Landeta was honest in her estimates of film production, other directors in the industry over-estimated the cost of making a film in order to pocket some of the money.

²⁰ Interview with Matilde Landeta, *op cit.*

²¹ Emilio Garcia Riera, *Historia Documental del Cine Mexicano*, *op cit*, vol IV, 1949-1951, Mexico City, Ediciones Era, 1972, pp 320-321.

²² *Lola Casanova*, 1948 and *La Negra Angustias*, 1949.

cooperatives. Landeta also ventured into television, including a Mexican adaptation of the US children's series *Howdy Doody*.¹⁵)

In 1948, Landeta received financial backing from the National Cinematographic Bank to direct her first feature film, *Lola Casanova*, adapted from the novel by Francisco Rojas Gonzales and based on the historical incident of a *criolla*¹⁶ who decides to rescue her father from ruin by marrying a wealthy merchant whom she does not love. On the way to Hermosillo for the wedding, they are ambushed by the Seris Indians who kill everyone except Lola. As a captive, she becomes a well-known healer in the tribe, eventually marrying the chief. Through this union, she is able to bring the tribe into national cultural life. The figure of Lola, one critic has argued, is an allegory for the 'Mother Country', with its mixture of Indians, mestizos and criollas who undergo post-colonial unification through the unselfish love of a white woman.¹⁷

The film caused a stir within the industry because Landeta refused to follow the national producers' code and shooting restrictions.¹⁸ The negatives of *Lola Casanova* were mysteriously damaged and its imminent distribution halted. The National Cinematographic Bank insisted she distribute the film through the Producers Association, who looked upon Landeta as a liability to their inflated budgets, kickbacks and shady dealings.¹⁹ The film was finally released without publicity during Holy Week (a time when most businesses are closed)²⁰, but nevertheless did well and was kindly received by most critics.

Trotacalles (Streetwalker, 1951), is a commentary on prostitution and the exploitation of women. Based on a screenplay by Luis Spota, the film critiques the role and place to which women are relegated within the social structure. Two sisters, Maria and Elena, are rivals for the same lover. Estranged from each other, the sisters follow different roads: Maria becomes a prostitute and Elena makes a loveless marriage with a wealthy banker. While her husband is away, Elena rekindles an affair with Rudy, who has become Maria's pimp. The two plot to rob Elena's husband by absconding with a million dollars worth of bank shares. Maria, in an attempt to dissuade Elena from further involvement with Rudy, warns her sister of her pimp's treachery, but Elena ignores her, claiming jealousy. In an attempt to prevent Rudy from meeting Elena, Maria is murdered by him and he in turn is shot by the police. Elena returns home to find that her husband knows everything. Thrown out of the house, she too becomes a prostitute.²¹

In 1949, Landeta acquired the rights to the novel *La Negra Angustias* by Francisco Rojas Gonzales, who in 1944 had won the National Literary Award for the best ethnographic novel based on an actual figure. She then wrote a script adapting the novel to the screen, significantly altering the central character as well as the novel's ending. Many of Rojas Gonzales' novels were based on characters derived from his contact with marginal ethnic groups living in remote areas of Mexico. His protagonists often exercised some agency that brought about social change, so it is not difficult to see the attraction of his writing for Landeta, who based two of her films on his work.²²

Given her experience of the distribution of *Lola Casanova*, Landeta became very protective of *La Negra Angustias*:

I did not want the film to be released by the Mexican Film Producers Association, so I went to see my friend Gabriel Alarcon, owner of a chain of theatres throughout the country, and we agreed to premiere the film in Monterrey. I took personal charge of the publicity and every aspect of its release. The film was a success with both audience and critics, although a few Latin American countries like Perú, Bolivia and Cuba banned it for being too 'revolutionary'.²³

La Negra Angustias unfolds in rural Mexico around 1903, with an opening shot of a mulata child, Angustias, herding a flock of goats. Abandoned as an infant by her father Antón, she is relegated to the care of an old woman *curandera*²⁴, Crecencia, notorious for healing and necromancy. The child's pet goat dies giving birth, and Angustias develops a fierce hatred for billy-goats, stoning them during copulation. After years of hard labour, Antón returns and takes Angustias back to live with him.

For the eight years that follow, Antón recounts his glorious escapades as a benevolent bandit while fulminating against the oppression that the country suffers under the regime of Porfirio Díaz. 'This revolution,' he tells her, 'is going to ignite like fire. Too bad that I am old and that you are a woman.' After a shot/reverse shot of Angustias listening to Antón recount his past exploits, a dissolve conveys the passage of time to Angustias' young womanhood and femininity. She is soon known in the village for her repudiation of the *machos* who seek her out for her desirability and for the mystery that her *marimacho*²⁵ image represents. Because of her rejection of male suitors, her sexuality becomes an issue in the village; the women first shun, then band together against her, perceiving her as a threat to their own sexual identity.

Accused of harbouring evil spirits, Angustias flees from the village women into the home of Crecencia, who performs a healing ceremony to cast them out. Then, in a confrontation with a *macho* who attempts to rape her, Angustias stabs him and flees the village, only to be taken prisoner by a group of bandits. One of them, Huitlacoche, befriends her and helps her escape from the clutches of the landowner and rapist El Picado.

Huitlacoche and Angustias arrive in the region where Antón was once well known as a bandit. There, upon listening to a *corrido*²⁶ about her father, Angustias becomes fired with determination to be a *revolucionaria* like her father; taking advantage of his fame, she demands recognition and established herself as *Coronela*. In her subsequent travels with her small band of men, she encounters the rapist El Picado, and orders that he be taken prisoner and later castrated at the hands of Huitlacoche, while she smiles at his lamentations.

The film's crisis comes when Angustias falls in love with Manolo, an anaemic-looking, blonde bourgeois contracted to teach her to read.

²³ Interview with Matilde Landeta, op cit.

²⁴ *Curandera* refers usually to a woman healer, who utilises herbs and prayers to exorcise or cure maladies trapped inside the body.

²⁵ *Marimacho* – a woman whose appearance and actions are viewed as masculine. The term also has connotations of lesbianism. *Machorra*, *Machona*, *Machota* are all similar in meaning to *Marimacho*, but only in relation to the 'masculine woman', while *Machota* can also mean 'a brave or valiant woman'. In Rojas Gonzales' original novel there are overt lesbian speculations. 'It is said that Angustias repudiated the "machos" because women attracted her to the point of sin.'

²⁶ *Corrido* is a Mexican ballad, usually anonymous, whose descriptive content is based on some historical incident or event. For Landeta, 'it is history put to music'.

Weakened by love, Angustias declares herself to Manolo, who rejects her because of her race and social class. Morally crushed, Angustias temporarily loses both identity and revolutionary purpose, and it is only through Huitlacoche's death that she regains her power and sense of mission, once more taking command of her revolutionary army.

By contrast, in the novel by Rojas Gonzales, the reader is made to witness the systematic disintegration of Angustias. In a drunken stupor, she abducts Manolo after he rejects her, and takes him back to her village where, in her subservient passion, she allows Manolo to exploit the fame and prestige she had gained as *Coronela*. As Manolo discovers his identity as a *macho*, she dissolves her own. Toward the end of the novel, Manolo places Angustias and the child he has fathered in a *casa menor*²⁷ outside the capital. There, the abandoned Angustias is nevertheless heard singing blissfully to her infant.²⁸

Rojas Gonzales based his novel on an actual revolutionary, a *mulata* who rose to the rank of colonel in the Mexican Revolution of 1911 to 1917. Landeta describes her meeting with the 'real' Angustias:

*Rojas Gonzales took me to meet her in 1948 prior to the filming. I remember being very impressed by her diminutive stature. There she was, smoking a cigar. She appeared older than her sixty years and lived alone in the mountains of Guerrero in a little hut. She had a sharp tongue, malhablada y llena de picardias (full of profanities and mischievous wit), as she remembered clearly the revolution. She married, had a son (Manuelito, a mestizo, who became a teacher) and lived in Mexico City until the end of the revolution, after which time she returned to her mountain village.*²⁹

²⁷ In Latin America, a *casa menor* or *casa chica* is the house to which a *querida* (kept woman) is relegated by a married male who does not live with her.

²⁸ Francisco Rojas Gonzales, *La Negra Angustias*, Mexico City, Edición Y Distribucion Ibero Americana de Publicaciones, 1948, p 228.

²⁹ Interview with Matilde Landeta, op cit.

³⁰ Robin Morgan (ed), *The International Women's Movement Anthology, Sisterhood is Global*, New York, Anchor Books, 1984, p 440.

³¹ Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (trans Lysander Kemp), New York, Grove Press, 1961, pp 36-37.

The Mexican Revolutions between 1867 and 1917 saw many women participate in the resistance, as front-line soldiers, nurses and camp followers, some rising to the rank of Colonel. It is as though history had temporarily stopped to reclaim gender equality. However, after these struggles, women returned to their private spheres of domesticity, and it was not until 1953 that women in Mexico were given the right to vote.³⁰ In *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, Octavio Paz discusses the influence of Spanish-Arabic culture on Mexican views of femininity. 'A woman was considered to be a domesticated wild animal, lecherous and sinful since birth, who must be subdued with a stick and guided by the reins of religion.' And he goes on,

*The Mexican considers woman to be a dark, secret and passive being. . . . woman who is never herself, whether lying stretched out or standing up straight, whether naked or clothed, she is an undifferentiated manifestation of life, a channel for the universal appetite. In this sense, she has no desires of her own.*³¹

So, for the *macho*, woman is never herself. Stripped of her desire, she represents difference, mystery, the 'other' and ultimately a lie that the *macho* fears, venerates, possesses and controls. The Mexican woman,

according to Paz, appears to be historically bound to the subservient passivity inherent in the legacy of being a *chingada*³², a receptacle for male aggression and sexual need. The *chingon*, Paz continues,

*is the macho, the male; he rips open the chingada, the female, who is pure passivity, defenseless against the exterior world. The relationship between them is violent, and it is determined by the cynical power of the first and the impotence of the second.*³³

The strength of the Mexican woman then, according to Paz, lies not in resisting the violence of her male assailant, but rather in quietly stoic endurance. The Latin American woman is a construction of passivity, vulnerability and helplessness valued by the male for its eroticism and phallic consolation.

For Landeta, women have been represented in Mexican films as:

*victims or as la madrecita, the venerated archetypal mother, the one who demands respect at all cost. Una mujer absurda (an absurd woman), the vamp, is portrayed without power or intellect, and is made to measure her capacity for being and self worth only in relation to the institution and image of motherhood.*³⁴

This definition of women's power was reinforced at the turn of the century, when woman was inscribed to signify the private, the sexual and the incorporation of feeling that placed her in the role of custodian of the social. Woman's essence and identity as moral subject helped to cement her sexual identity. If she stepped out of her assigned place in society, she had no protection. So when Landeta chose to film *La Negra Angustias*, her intention was to portray the image of a woman who undergoes a metamorphosis into a powerful revolutionary. For Landeta, the unfavourable representations of women in Mexican cinema had to change.

*There is the female companion, who patiently and faithfully stands by her husband through years of self abnegation and servitude, while he womanises and gets drunk. An aggressive man is the one who wields a pistol while his wife wields a rosary and prays.*³⁵

La Negra Angustias provides by way of its heroine a more 'positive', yet, at times, problematic identification for the Latina spectator than the Mexican popular *ranchera* or *exotica*³⁶ film genres that glorify the male hero and fetishise the female body. Psychoanalysis argues that the male construction of woman as a fetishised object is connected to men's fear at the sight of women's genitals and the castrating threat that feminine difference poses.³⁷ This is played out in the scene where the village suitor Rito, his marriage proposal rejected by Angustias, begins to question his sexual identity. 'Am I not man enough to satisfy Angustias?' he asks. Rito is quick to blame Angustias for his anxiety, accusing her of being deviant (*marimacho*). 'Angustias is not a woman,' Rito cries out.

³² *ibid*, pp 76-77:
'Chingar then, is to do violence to another. The verb is masculine, active, cruel; it stings, wounds, gashes, stains. And it provokes a bitter, resentful satisfaction. The person who suffers this action is passive, inert and open, in contrast to the active, aggressive and closed person who inflicts it.' *Chingar* also connotes rape and is associated with the historical figure of 'La Malinche' and the role ascribed to her (by male historians) in the Mexican Conquest by Fernando Cortez, 1519-1521.

³³ *ibid*, pp 77.

³⁴ Interview with Matilde Landeta, *op cit*.

³⁵ *ibid*.

³⁶ *Rancheras* were a genre of Mexican film prevalent in the 1940s and 1950s with similarities to the Hollywood western. *Exoticas*, or cabaret films, were also popular in Mexico in the '40s and '50s and often contained elements of the film noir.

³⁷ Sigmund Freud, 'Fetishism', *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love* (ed Philip Rieff), New York, Macmillan, 1963, pp 216-219.



The cast and crew of *La Negra Angustias*, with director Matilde Landeta arrowed and, next right, Maria Elena Marquez, who played the title role.

His sexual identity was determined by the law of the phallus as signifier; her difference guaranteed that identity. Now that it is questioned, Rito must take action in order to minimise his castration anxiety. He can choose to investigate Angustias by deciphering the enigma that she represents (if she is not a woman, then who or what is she?) or, by substitution, turn her into a fetish object to minimise the threat that her image represents.

In an effort to persuade Angustias to reconsider the marriage proposal, her father tells her, 'You are desperately asking for a *macho* to tame you and make you whole.' Angustias replies with anger, knowing that Rito is a notorious womaniser: 'No, that is a lie, I do not need *machos* for anything'. In the novel, this passage is undercut by the author's portrayal of Angustias in a state of sexual hysteria. 'No, I do not need *machos* for anything, Angustias responded. Lying there on top of the "metate" she cried, sobbing, and almost screaming like a cat in heat tied down by invisible cords.'³⁸ The contrast between these two scenes illuminates the distance that separates the version of the male author with patriarchal assumptions and that of this woman director.

Where the film's other women characters (the village women who stone Angustias, the prostitutes in the cantinas, the *criolla* who pleads for her lover's life) are depictions of vulnerability, powerlessness and the renunciation of desire, Angustias' sexual identity oscillates between feminine and masculine. The narrative focuses on the construction of an

³⁸ Francisco Rojas Gonzales, *La Negra Angustias*, op cit, p 29.

image which is never quite resolved, as she moves away from the private into the realm of the public taking on her father's phallic identity as revolutionary agent and leader. Angustias finds within the revolution a place of sanctuary that signifies her escape from assigned gender.

At the film's beginning, Angustias is presented as femininity surrounded by the masculine and the sexual (the possibility of her violation) – the phallic accoutrements of the *Charros* (the big sombreros and the bandolero costumes of revolutionaries) in what Landeta has called 'El Mejico Bravo' (the Mexican landscape as wild, violent and male³⁹). In this feminine position, she is denied articulation and agency. Conversely, Angustias the *Coronela* may speak the discourse of the male revolutionaries, but it is not hers as woman.

So who is Angustias? Her separateness, her difference, is visually marked by her colour – a black skin repeatedly dramatised by *noir* lighting and the contrasting whiteness of her costume. Her colour encodes her difference from other women as Angustias steps out of her assigned space to find protection within the revolution. And in Manolo – a blonde, timid *criollo* who uses his mother as an intermediary between himself and Angustias, his own figure almost squeezed out of the frame – she finds a masculine identity as ambiguous as her own . . .

In relating 'the silent chasm'⁴⁰ between Mexico's white *criollas* and black mestizos to that which divides the sexes, Landeta anticipated the multiple concerns of modern feminism – the articulation of oppression across gender, race and class. She remains an active force in her country's cinema, a member of an independent production cooperative and the Academy of Film Arts and Sciences. Landeta recently completed a documentary on Luis Spota and is currently preparing a screenplay about the more than one million abandoned children of Mexico City. Like *La Negra Angustias*, it will stress both oppression and resistance, the two themes which have figured so highly in the career of this pioneer woman film-maker:

*The idea of this film is not simply to denounce the social situation, but also to recognise the tremendous ingenuity and creativity of Mexico's adolescent poor in constructing a shelter. I plan to begin shooting by Fall of 1987.*⁴¹

³⁹ Interview with Matilde Landeta, op cit.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*

⁴¹ *ibid.*

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

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PASSIVE COMPETENCE

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A PHOTO ESSAY BY
LALEEN JAYAMANNE

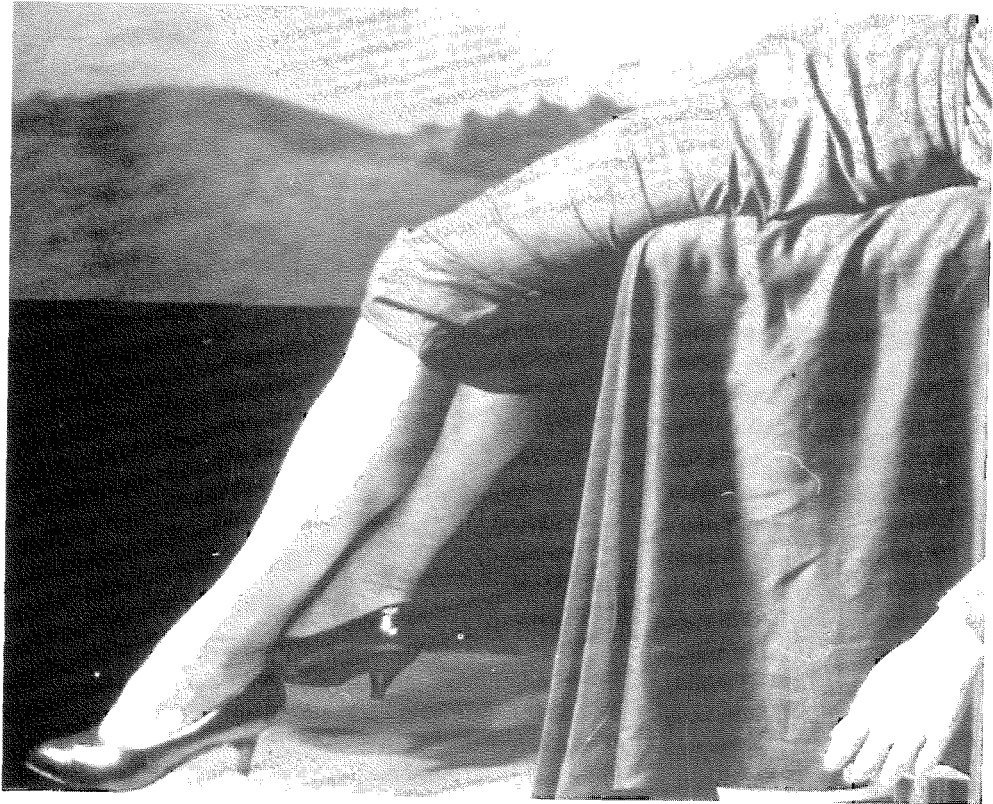


Juan: Hmm. The normal sequence would be from the make-up photo to the completed image or from the blurred image to the clear one.

Off-screen voice (female): Hmmm.







Juan: She tries to make sense of street scenes where quite arbitrarily a transvestite performer would appear.

(pause)

Beer if you have it.

What was it that he said?

Robert: He said, 'Emphatically, I Kali with eighteen other manifestations. . . .'

Juan: No, no I was trying to think of that phrase, remember? The one that he said sounded odd in English.

Robert: Narrative . . .

Juan: Prodigality



Robert: Narrative prodigality. Hmm.
Where is he from?

Juan: He is English
Where are you from?

Robert: Not here. And you?

Juan: (quiet laughter) Can't you tell?

Robert: Not really.

Juan: She said that the Sinhalese word for transvestite is *napunsaka*, neither male nor female, neuter.

Robert: Ah.

Off-screen voice: No, no, say Aaah.







Off-screen voice: This is the man you will talk about who killed himself.

Juan: Ah.

Off-screen voice: He is the godfather, but he is not in this sequence.

Juan: Not there.

Off-screen voice: No, not there.



Robert: Ah (pause) your accent is

Juan: What is your mother tongue?

Robert: Actually English. But I understand Sinhalese and Tamil.

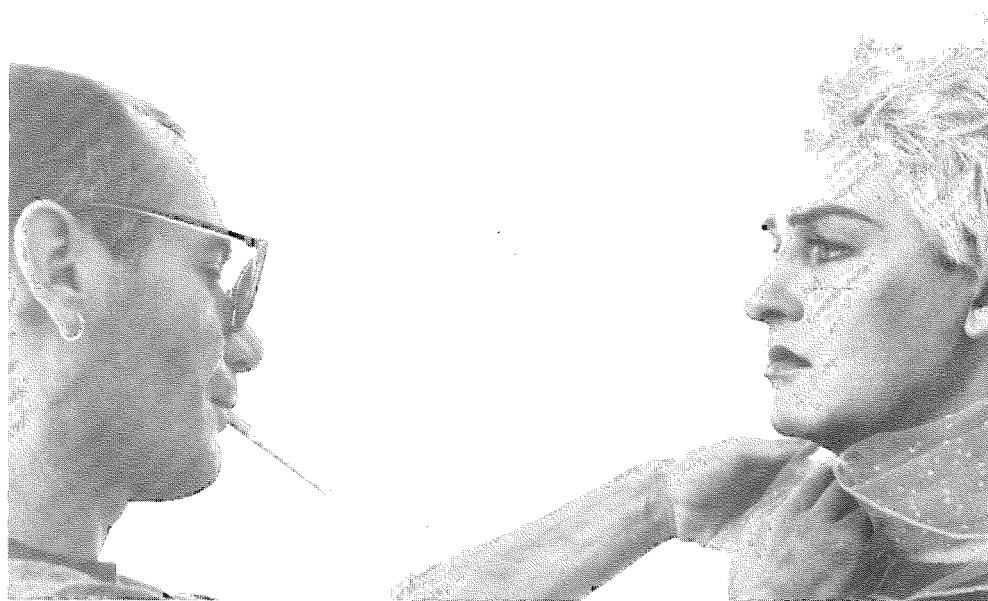
Off-screen voice: Say Tamil and Sinhalese.

Robert: Actually English. But I understand Tamil and Sinhalese.

Juan: You don't speak them?

Robert: I don't speak them. I've lost my fluency. I have what's called passive competence.

Juan: Passive competence.



Robert: I can tell what's grammatical and what's not but can't speak the languages.



Juan: Can you write in those languages?



Robert: Yes, a bit better than I can speak them. (pause) This photo reminds me of. . .

Juan: Why did he kill himself?

Robert: This looks like a. . .

(pause)

I don't think she knows, though she'd like to. She said that he was a grandfather when he threw himself at the train. She couldn't stop thinking of him. (pause)

Of an aging landlord's desperation.

She remembers his laugh. An ungentlemanly convulsion, plum body folding up, exploding in little spasms, unable to contain itself.

The bald shiny head.

The hook-nosed fleshy face distorted in a cunning delirium , almost unmanly. . .

Juan: Womanly perhaps?

Robert: Does that follow logically?

Juan: Come. I'll show you what does.

Geeta Kapur: *In The Man Who Envied Women* you seem to make the subjectivity of the man completely opaque. You do not wish it to be accessible in any way?

Yvonne Rainer: *I wish to comment upon patriarchy. The problem is that I'm using enough narrative conventions for the audience to identify with him. I find that problematic because some people find him ridiculous; they can't listen to him at the end because they find him ridiculous at the beginning, especially all the stuff from Raymond Chandler's letters next to the film clips. Since Chandler is a disseminator of much of the ideology of '40s films, that seemed to fit together very well. And though his obsessions about women might seem a bit dated, I still think it's relevant.*

I could not have written it. This was my dilemma for a long time: how to write dialogue for this man. So resorting to the authenticity of the extant text was the solution. Opaque? He is both opaque and overly familiar.

Geeta Kapur: *But I was trying to suggest that that overfamiliarity itself makes him opaque. There is no interest whatsoever in reading him further because of the overfamiliarity.*¹

The pursuit of the idea of a non-referential man should, she thought, lead to something, happiness perhaps, but if that were too much to hope for then maybe to a short film without too much distress; and though she likes to keep Kluge's comment 'I am convinced that film has something to do with happiness' in mind, she also knows that film has something to do with sadness and loss, not unlike love.

To make a non-existent man through and with the bodies of flesh and blood men is a possibility she learned from reading about one of Kuleshov's famous experiments – the creation of a synthetic woman by shooting different fragments of several women's bodies, while retaining a constant background and movement. The montage of these body fragments, he said, created the image of a woman who had no existence outside the image.²

Now what is appealing in this classic Soviet

experiment is not that particular technique of montage so much as the idea of producing an imaginary man on film by a certain kind of camera movement/framing/*mise-en-scène* made to work together with a particular use of the voice. The driving image is still that of the somewhat anachronistic figure of puppet and puppeteer with its roots in the pretechnological folk-arts. What appeals is the possibility of the undecidability of who moves whom. The puppeteer-puppet couple envisioned is not one of absolute devotion but a relationship of decorum and cordiality that leaves space between bodies and voices.³

¹ Laleen Jayamanne, Geeta Kapur and Yvonne Rainer, 'Discussing Modernity, "Third World", and *The Man Who Envied Women*', *Art and Text*, March-May 1987, vol 23 no 4.

² 'This brought a second experiment to my mind. In the first one we had created an arbitrary earthly terrain; along a single line of movement we created an arbitrary scenic background. In the second we let the background and the line of movement of the person remain the same, but we interchanged the people themselves. I shot a girl sitting before her mirror, painting her eyelashes and brows, putting on lipstick and slippers.

By montage alone we were able to depict the girl, just as in nature, but in actuality she did not exist, because we shot the lips of one woman, the legs of another, the back of a third, and the eyes of a fourth. We spliced the pieces together in a predetermined relationship and created a totally new person, still retaining the complete reality of the material. This particular example likewise demonstrated that the entire power of cinematic effect is in montage. With the material alone one can achieve such unique, seemingly incredible things. This is impossible in any other spectacle excepting cinema . . .', Ronald Levaco (ed), *Kuleshov on Film: Writings of Lev Kuleshov*, Berkeley, California, University of California Press, 1974.

³ The images of this photo essay are production stills from *A Song of Ceylon*, of Juan Davila being transformed into Kim Novak. With the exception of one image, the rest do not appear in this film. These stills have now been incorporated as still images in a new film (in progress) called *Rehearsing*. This film is conceived as a sequel to *A Song of Ceylon* in at least two senses: to extend the first film's thematic concerns in a film that figures only male bodies and to work through some of the formal problems in the previous work, especially in editing. Because *Rehearsing* incorporates the film still as object part of its problem was to bring the two spaces (the moving and the still-frozen) together, or to make the still affect the moving. The action of *Rehearsing*, apart from embodying what the title suggests, could be described as a staging of a combat of sorts between two men and a series of photographs. For the purposes of this essay I have limited myself to one sequence of photos and included the two men only in terms of the dialogue. The other images are of birth and death, one set belonging to the genre of the family photo album (Sri Lanka, 1910 and 1947). The other is a recent *Time* Magazine colour image of the funeral bier of a Tamil murdered by the Sri Lankan army. The dialogue in this photo essay is a selection from the text of *Rehearsing*.

120 This process is also not that of conjuring up the Other. Male artists and philosophers have gained much mileage through the fabulation of Women as Other. Women working in processes of symbolisation can learn a thing or two from this, not however by simply reversing that very same logic of opposition. Rather, what is sought after is something partial, fragmented, in order to arouse interest. It may not be such a bad idea to try and *make man strange and unfamiliar* (defamiliarise)

in much the same way that Russian Formalists conceived of the poetic function of language. Those women who may have various complicated investments in male sexuality may profitably redirect their energies from only parodying sexist behaviour in men to something that produces male bodies and voices in surprising configurations. Not all film-makers would be interested in this kind of work, nor is this a plea against parody. It is more an expression of a preference, for it seems a pity not to use the possibilities of cinema for producing ambivalent representations of bodies. Let us see the famous bisexuality thesis spread a bit more evenly so that the non-existent men will also be able to share in the pleasures and burdens of bisexuality.⁴

⁴ Naomi Schor, 'Female Fetishism: The Case of George Sand', in Susan Rubin Suleiman (ed), *The Female Body in Western Culture, Contemporary Perspectives*, Cambridge, Mass, Harvard University Press, 1986.

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